

AFC QUARTERLY

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE ASIAN FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION

ISSUE 21



PLUS

Samantha Kerr

The 2017 AFC Women's Player of the Year in the form of her life

OMAR KHRIBIN

AFC Player of the Year award for Al Hilal and Syria Striker



AFC
CHAMPIONS
LEAGUE 2018

Preview

ISSUE
21

January 2018



ALI MABKHOUT

UAE and Al Jazira forward who is already being talked about as one of his nation's greats



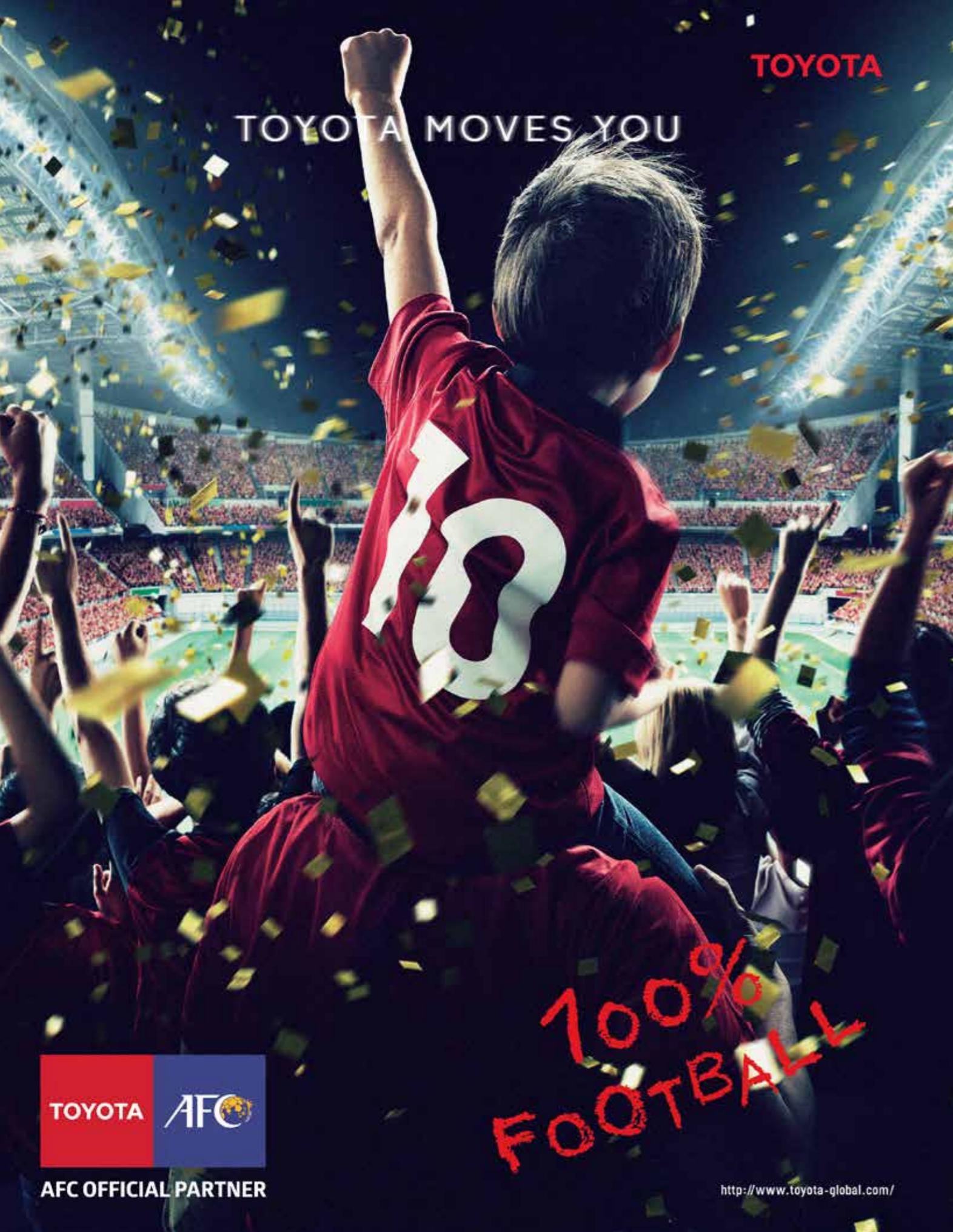
CHAN YUEN-TING

Record-breaking coach discusses her AFC Champions League experience and the women's game in Asia



FAYSAL SHAYESTEH

Afghanistan captain reflects on his decision to represent his homeland at international level



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CONTENTS



24 – AFC Champions League Preview

We take a closer look at the teams who have already secured their place in the 2018 AFC Champions League group stage.

30 – Samantha Kerr

AFC Women's Player of the Year Samantha Kerr opens up on an incredible year after putting career-threatening injuries firmly behind her.

34 – Ali Mabkhout

Following a record-breaking season with UAE champions Al Jazira, Ali Mabkhout starred at the FIFA Club World Cup on home soil and will again look to shine at next year's AFC Asian Cup.

38 – Chan Yuen-ting

The AFC Champions League's first female coach looks back on the last 12 months while also offering her view on the women's game ahead of the 2018 AFC Women's Asian Cup in Jordan.

42 – Widodo Putro

Former Indonesia international Widodo Putro reflects on one of the most memorable goals in AFC Asian Cup history.

44 – Faysal Shayesteh

After growing up in the Netherlands, Faysal Shayesteh never forgot his roots, and the midfielder talks about his pride at captaining the Afghanistan national team.

Regular Sections

14 – In The News

48 – FIFA World Cup Qualifiers

50 – AFC Champions League

52 – AFC Cup

54 – AFC U-19 Women's

Championship

57 – AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers

58 – Inside AFC

62 – Great Grounds of Asia

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At the heart of the image



Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa

AFC President



Dear friends,

As one year ends and 2018 dawns, this is the perfect time to reflect on the Asian Football Confederation's achievements and the excitement that will be awaiting us in the new year – especially with the FIFA World Cup Russia 2018 and the AFC Women's Asian Cup Jordan 2018.

It was a historic moment in November when, after 22 matches, Australia beat Honduras in the Intercontinental Playoff to become the record fifth Asian team to qualify for Russia 2018 – joining the Islamic Republic of Iran, Japan, Korea Republic and Saudi Arabia on the global stage.

The Women's Asian Cup in Jordan is another historic event – the first time the competition has been held in the West of Asia and again we congratulate the eight finalists who will play for the continental crown in Amman in April.

We are also in the closing stages of the qualifying for the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 with seven nations still in contention for the four remaining places as eight of the 12 that were available at the start of this final qualifying round have been claimed.

There will be great excitement ahead of the draw which will be held in the host country of the United Arab Emirates on April 27, 2018. As you can see this is a very packed but exciting schedule early in 2018 – especially when you add the AFC Futsal and Women's Futsal Championships.

The AFC Champions League final 2017 provided a fitting finale for the club action with a colourful and thrilling night of action in Saitama, Japan when Urawa Red Diamonds clinched the crown when they held off the challenge of Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal. The two-leg final attracted a record 116,800 fans – further evidence of the growing appeal of the competition.

With Air Force Club of Iraq retaining the AFC Cup, the AFC can look back proudly on a year which saw Asia host four major FIFA events and live up to the aim of being a world leading Confederation.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the match officials, administrators and all those people behind the scenes involved in football across Asia who have all contributed so much towards making 2017 an outstanding year. Without their hard work, none of what we have achieved this year would have been possible. Again, I thank you all.

I wish you all a very successful 2018.

Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President

Gallery



Shining Diamonds

Urawa Red Diamonds players rejoiced in winning the AFC Champions League title after Rafael Silva's late goal secured a 2-1 aggregate victory over Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal at Saitama Stadium in November as the Japanese side claimed their second continental crown to add to their 2007 success.

Gallery



Flying High

Iraq's Air Force Club celebrated back-to-back AFC Cup titles after Emad Mohsin struck the only goal in the 1-0 win over Tajikistan's FC Istiklol in the final in early November.

Gallery



Hat-trick Hero

Captain Mile Jedinak picked the perfect moment to score his first treble for Australia as a 3-1 victory against Honduras in the second leg of the Intercontinental Playoff at Stadium Australia in November saw the Socceroos progress to a fourth successive FIFA World Cup.

Gallery



The Chosen Ones

Asian Football Confederation prize winners lined up for the cameras after winning their respective gongs at the prestigious AFC Annual Awards gala in Bangkok, Thailand at the end of November.



Omar Khribin And Samantha Kerr Pick Up Top Awards

SYRIA STRIKER OMAR KHRIBIN IS NAMED THE AFC PLAYER OF THE YEAR AND AUSTRALIA FORWARD SAMANTHA KERR WINS THE AFC WOMEN'S PLAYER OF THE YEAR AT AWARDS GALA IN BANGKOK.



mar Khribin rounded off an excellent 12 months by being named the 2017 AFC Player of the Year in Bangkok, Thailand, at the end of November after seeing off competition from 2016 winner Omar Abdulrahman of the United Arab Emirates and China's Wu Lei.

The Syria forward helped fire Saudi Arabian club Al Hilal to a second AFC Champions League final in four years, finishing the tournament as top scorer but ultimately as runners-up to Japanese side Urawa Red Diamonds.

He was also a key member of the Syria team that grabbed global headlines in advancing beyond the third round of FIFA World Cup Russia 2018 qualifiers to a Continental Play-Off with Australia.

Khribin enjoyed a five-goal haul in the AFC Champions League semi-finals as Al Hilal stormed past the Islamic Republic of Iran's Persepolis 6-2 on aggregate, before he scored his 10th goal of the tournament in the first leg of the final against Urawa.

At international level, Khribin netted a late penalty to claim a 1-0 victory over Uzbekistan in March, before he added another two in seeing off Qatar 3-1 as Syria finished third in Group A.

World Cup hopes may have ended in Sydney, but 2017 was a year that saw Khribin firmly establish himself as one of the top players in Asia.

"We hope that next year we will do our best to try and get the AFC Champions League title for Al Hilal," said Khribin.

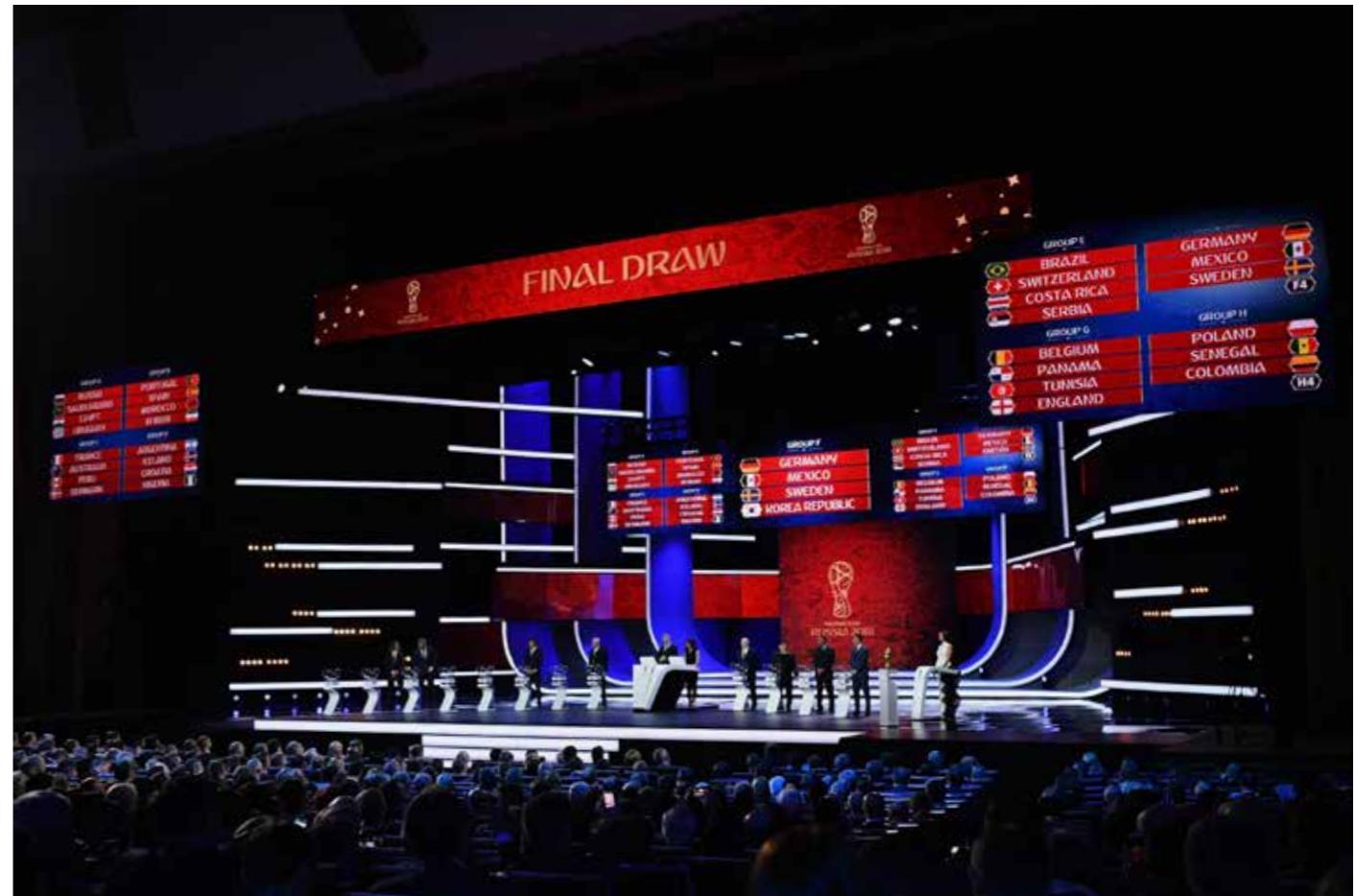
"I would like to promise the Syrian people that we will do our best to bring happiness and joy during the 2019 AFC Asian Cup finals."

In the women's game, Samantha Kerr picked up the award after a stunning year that saw her score the most goals in a single season of the United States' National Women's Soccer League for Sky Blue FC and named the campaign's Most Valuable Player.

A hat-trick against Japan helped the Matildas to a 4-2 victory in the inaugural Tournament of Nations, before the forward added another goal in a 6-1 win over Brazil as Australia finished above the East Asians, the South Americans and the hosts to lift the title.

"A lot of Australians have previously won it, so I'm very humbled to win it ... it's such a great reward," said Kerr.

"I'm really proud to be flying the flag for Australia for the growth of women's football and things like this help."



Asian Teams Learn FIFA World Cup Russia 2018 Opponents

THE DRAW FOR NEXT SUMMER'S FIFA WORLD CUP FINALS IN RUSSIA TOOK PLACE IN MOSCOW IN DECEMBER WITH THE ASIAN FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION'S FIVE PARTICIPANTS HANDED INTRIGUING FIXTURES.

Asia's representatives at the FIFA World Cup Russia 2018 learned their group stage opponents after the draw was held at Moscow's State Kremlin Palace at the beginning of December.

For the first time ever, the competition will feature five Asian Football Confederation teams after Australia saw off Honduras in the Intercontinental Playoff to join the Islamic Republic of Iran, Japan, Korea Republic and Saudi Arabia at the 2018 showpiece.

Having not appeared at the tournament since 2006, Saudi Arabia will take centre stage for the opening game in Moscow on June 14, after being drawn in Group A alongside Russia.

The Saudis, who recently installed Argentine Juan Antonio Pizzi as their new head coach, will

next travel to Rostov-on-Don to face Uruguay before rounding off their group stage against Egypt in Volgograd.

Asia's top-ranked team Iran have landed in a tough Group B with former winners Spain, European champions Portugal and Morocco.

With the two European giants to come, Iran's first match with Morocco in Saint Petersburg on June 15 is already looking crucial, before facing Spain in Kazan five days later.

Carlos Queiroz will then look to get one over his native Portugal in Saransk as he bids to guide Team Melli to the knockout rounds for the first time in their history.

Another side tasked with former champions is Australia, who will open their tournament in Group C against 1998 winners France in Kazan on June 16.

The Socceroos then head to Samara to take on Denmark and will complete their three

Group C games against Peru in Sochi. Korea Republic will open their ninth successive FIFA World Cup in Nizhny Novgorod, where they line up against Sweden in Group F on June 18.

Next up will be fellow tournament regulars Mexico in Rostov-on-Don, before the Taeguk Warriors head to Kazan for a meeting with defending champions Germany.

Finally, Japan will take to the field in Group H alongside Colombia, Senegal and Poland in what appears to be one of the most evenly matched groups of the draw.

First up will be Colombia in Saransk on June 19, before Yekaterinburg is the setting for the clash with Senegal.

The Japanese will complete the first round against Poland in Volgograd as they target a third place in the last 16 having managed the feat in both 2002 and 2010.



West Asian Giants Meet In AFC Champions League

ast year's runners-up Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran's Esteghlal, both two-time continental champions, have been paired alongside each other in Group D of the 2018 AFC Champions League after the draw took place at AFC House in Kuala Lumpur in December.

The sides will be joined by Qatar's Al Rayyan and the winner of the play-off match between 2016 runners-up Al Ain of the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain's Malkiya Club.

Al Sadd, the last team from West Asia to win the continental competition, in 2011, will line up in Group C alongside Iranian heavyweights Persepolis, the UAE's Al Wasl and the winner of the play-off clash between Uzbekistan's Nasaf

and Jordan's Al Faisaly.

In Group A, Saudi Arabia's Al Ahli face off against the UAE's Al Jazira, Iran's Tractorsazi Tabriz and either Qatar's Al Gharafa or Pakhtakor of Uzbekistan.

The newly formed Al Duhail – a merger between Qatar's Lekhwiya and Al Jaish – are in Group B, where they will be joined by Uzbekistan's Lokomotiv, Al Wahda of the UAE and the victor between Iran's Zobahan and Aizawl of India.

In the East, two-time winners Guangzhou Evergrande of China have been paired in Group G with Emperor's Cup winners Cerezo Osaka, Jeju United of Korea Republic and Thailand's Buriram United.

Former winners Ulsan Hyundai will kick off their campaign in Group F, where they will

meet recently crowned J.League champions Kawasaki Frontale, Australia's Melbourne Victory and another play-off winner.

In Group H, Japan's Kashima Antlers are joined by A-League champions Sydney FC and Chinese FA Cup winners Shanghai Shenhua, as well as another side to come through the play-offs.

Finally, two-time champions Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors of Korea Republic return to the mix in Group E alongside Hong Kong debutants Kitchee and two more teams to advance from the play-offs.

All remaining places for the 2018 AFC

Champions League will be decided following the preliminary and play-off rounds in January, ahead of the group stage, which kicks off on February 12.



Air Force Club On Hat-Trick Mission

efending champions Air Force Club will aim to become the first side to win three successive AFC Cups when they start the 2018 competition in Group A alongside Jordan's Al Jazeera, Malkiya Club or another side from Bahrain and a play-off winner.

In Group B, Al Jaish of Syria are tasked with Al Zawraa of Iraq, Manama Club of Bahrain and Lebanon's Al Ahed.

Syria's Al Wahda, Dhofar Club of Oman and Al Ansar of Lebanon – as well as one of Al Faisaly and Al Wehdat of Jordan – will complete the line up in the West in Group C.

Runners-up in 2015 and 2017, FC Istiklol will be in Group D – the Central Zone – where they

are tasked with FC Alay of the Kyrgyz Republic, Altny Asyr and a play-off winner.

In the South Zone, either Indian champions Aizawl or domestic rivals Mohun Bagan are placed in Group E alongside New Radiant of the Maldives, Bangladesh's Dhaka Abahani and a team that progresses through the play-offs.

Moving further east, Group F is the first of three ASEAN Zone groups and pairs together Singapore's Home United, Shan United or Yadanarbon of Myanmar, Cambodia's Boeung Ket Angkor and a side from the Philippines.

Indonesia's Bali United or Madura United will take to the stage in Group G, where they will meet Myanmar's Yangon United, a team from the Philippines and one of Vietnamese duo Hanoi FC and FLC Than Hoa.

In Group H, Indonesia's Persija Jakarta and Vietnam's Song Lam Nghe An FC have been drawn in Group H alongside 2015 champions Johor Darul Ta'zim or Selangor FA – both of Malaysia – and one of Singaporean duo Tampines Rovers and Geylang International.

In the East Zone, DPR Korea's 4.25 SC will play Chinese Taipei's Hang Yuen FC, Macau's Benfica Macau and a play-off winner in Group I.

Malkiya Club, Al Faisaly, Aizawl, Shan United, Bali United, Johor Darul Ta'zim, FLC Than Hoa, Tampines Rovers and the champions from the Philippines will all take part in the AFC Champions League qualifying rounds, but will be entered into the AFC Cup group stage if they fail to progress.

Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H
Al Jazira	Al Duhail	Persepolis	Al Hilal	Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors	Kawasaki Frontale	Guangzhou Evergrande	Sydney FC
Al Ahli	Al Wahda	Al Sadd	Esteghlal	Kitchee	Ulsan Hyundai	Cerezo Osaka	Shanghai Shenhua
Tractor Sazi Tabriz	Lokomotiv	Al Wasl	Al Rayyan	Play-off winner	Melbourne Victory	Jeju United	Kashima Antlers
Al Gharafa / Pakhtakor	Zobahan / Aizawl	Nasaf / Al Faisaly	Al Ain / Malkiya Club	Play-off winner	Play-off winner	Buriram United	Play-off winner

West Zone	Central Zone		South Zone	ASEAN Zone	East Zone			
Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H	Group I
Malkiya Club / Bahrain team	Al Ahed	Al Faisaly / Al Wehdat	FC Istiklol	Aizawl / Mohun Bagan	Philippines team	Bali United / Madura United	Tampines Rovers / Geylang International	4.25 SC
Al Jazeera	Manama Club	Al Ansar	Altny Asyr	New Radiant	Philippines team	Home United	Persija Jakarta	Hang Yuen FC
Air Force Club	Al Jaish	Dhofar Club	Al Rayyan	Dhaka Abahani	Shan United / Yadanarbon	FLC Than Hoa / Hanoi FC	Johor Darul Ta'zim / Selangor FA	Benfica Macau
Play-off winner	Al Zawraa	Al Wahda	Play-off winner	Play-off winner	Boeung Ket Angkor	Yangon United	Song Lam Nghe An FC	Play-off winner

HOT SHOT

OMAR KHRIBIN BEGAN 2017 ON LOAN AT AL HILAL BUT AFTER POSTING A SEASON TO REMEMBER FOR BOTH CLUB AND COUNTRY WHICH CULMINATED IN THE AFC PLAYER OF THE YEAR AND THE AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TOP SCORER AWARDS, THE SYRIAN STRIKER BEGINS 2018 AS ONE OF THE MOST TALKED ABOUT PLAYERS ON THE CONTINENT.

By: Wael Jaber Photos: Lagardère Sports





Aloan move to Saudi Arabian giants Al Hilal at the start of the year offered Omar Khribin the perfect platform to raise his game to a new level, but the ensuing 12 months saw him go above and beyond expectations.

Syria defied all odds to progress to the latter stages of FIFA World Cup qualifying, while Al Hilal would remain unbeaten on route to the AFC Champions League final. Khribin was instrumental for both.

“The most outstanding quality about Omar is his ambition,” commented Persepolis midfielder Bashar Resan, a close friend and former teammate of Khribin.

“He is always thinking about the future and working towards his dreams. His commitment and determination are impressive,” added Resan, who played alongside Khribin at Iraq’s Air Force Club.

Ambition and hard work were engrained in Khribin’s character since the early days of his childhood in Damascus. Watching his older brother Mohammed and the neighbourhood kids kick a ball about, he thought: “I will be good at this”. The past 12 months were indeed proof that young Omar grew up to be good at playing football.

Khribin came through the youth ranks at Damascus-based Al Wahda, where he started

his journey at the age of nine. At 15, he made his first-team debut, becoming the youngest player in the club’s history. Such was his talent, being the youngest became a constant feature in his career.

“THE MOST OUTSTANDING QUALITY ABOUT OMAR IS HIS AMBITION,” PERSEPOLIS MIDFIELDER BASHAR RESAN.

Before his 19th birthday, Khribin was a member of the Syrian national team that won the 2012 WAFF (West Asian Football Federation) Championship in Kuwait, again the youngest player in Syria’s history.

As the security situation in Syria worsened, the striker joined many other Syrian players in seeking contracts abroad. His destination was Baghdad side Air Force Club, where he teamed up with would-be 2016 AFC Cup top scorer Hammadi Ahmed to form a terrifying attacking duo.

The Syrian finished his 20-game loan spell at Air Force Club with eight goals to his name, prompting fellow Iraqi side Al Minaa to sign him on another loan deal the following season. But Khribin’s final campaign in Iraq was cut short and he returned to Al Wahda.

Syrian coach Mohamed Quaid, who led Al Karama to the 2006 AFC Champions League final, would later spend time coaching in the

Iraqi league, where he was impressed with his countryman Khribin.

UAE side Al Dhafra appointed Quaid for a third stint at the club in 2015 and one of his first requests was to acquire the services of Khribin.

“It is a stepping stone to bigger things,” said Khribin upon his unveiling at the Hamdan bin Zayed Stadium in early 2016. It would not be long before the prophecy was fulfilled.

One of the smallest teams in the UAE Pro League, Al Dhafra’s 5,000 capacity stadium is located in the small town of Madinat Zayed, a desert oil town with a population of under 30,000 people.

Not a place where many young footballers dream of plying their trade. Add an annual battle against relegation and the experience could prove a mountain too high for any young player, but Syria’s first million-dollar footballer faced the challenge head on.

The Al Dhafra board had splashed a club record US\$1 million to make Khribin the most expensive Syrian player of all time. It would prove to be one of the best signings in the club’s history as he formed one of the UAE Pro League’s most lethal attack lines with Senegalese striker Makhete Diop.

“It is one of the strongest leagues in Asia, I will get more exposure here where I can play against top players like Omar Abdulrahman

and Ali Mabkhout,” remarked Khribin after joining Al Dhafra in January 2016. Nearly two years later, he would pip Abdulrahman to the top individual prize in Asian football.

For now, Khribin set his eyes on the challenge of lifting the club from the danger zone and showcasing his talents for bigger sides who could be keeping an eye on the UAE league.

One year, 22 goals and a Fans’ Player of the Year award later, Khribin had not only helped Al Dhafra escape relegation, but also contributed to their highest ever league finish, ending the 2016/17 season in seventh place.

His task at Al Dhafra had been accomplished, and it was time to take the next step. One of many clubs impressed by the Syrian’s talents were Saudi giants Al Hilal.

The thought of playing at one of Asia’s most popular clubs appealed to Khribin. So, when the club from Riyadh called, he was ready to answer. A loan deal was in place and the King Fahd International Stadium became his new home for the next six months.

‘Impress to Stay’ was Khribin’s mission and motto for his loan stint in Riyadh, and impress he did. Two weeks after his arrival at the Saudi capital, the number 77 broke his Al Hilal duck and from there on there was no stopping him.

Against arch-rivals Al Ittihad in March, he endeared himself to the fans by scoring the second goal in a 3-1 win.

All 2017 AFC Champions League

“IT IS A STEPPING STONE TO BIGGER THINGS.”

A return to the UAE was on the agenda for Khribin as Al Hilal travelled to Abu Dhabi to face Al Wahda on Matchday Three of the 2017 AFC Champions League. The Emiratis had a 2-1 lead and a one-man advantage going into the final half an hour, when Khribin got on the end of a squared pass, rounded the goalkeeper and claimed his first of many AFC Champions League goals.

Syria had already surprised many by reaching the decisive third round of the 2018 FIFA World Cup qualifiers. The ‘Qasioun Eagles’ grabbed the headlines early on by winning in China before drawing with Korea Republic in the Syrians’ adopted home of Malaysia, where they were to face Uzbekistan in March.

The match had looked destined for a draw but Khribin stepped up to confidently convert an added-time penalty to put Syria back in contention for qualification spots.

Khribin then went into his first Riyadh derby in the final week of the season. Al Hilal had already wrapped up the league title as they welcomed Al Nassr with one thing on their mind: to show their city rivals who the boss is.

A defeat here would blemish an otherwise perfect league campaign.

Always one to relish a challenge, Khribin was at his lethal best as Al Hilal turned the style on, putting five past their visitors. The Syrian made his mark on the derby records with a memorable hat-trick. A diving header in the first half was followed by a three-minute double salvo after the break to sign off his first league season in style.

Just a few days after that impressive derby performance, Al Hilal were back in AFC Champions League. Having already secured their passage to the knockout stage, Khribin netted a brace, including the winning goal, in their final group game against Qatar’s Al Rayyan as the Saudi side secured an entertaining 4-3 victory to top the standings.

Al Hilal took a 2-1 away lead into the second leg of the last 16 against the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Esteghlal Khuzestan, but within the first ten minutes their advantage had been cancelled out.

Five minutes later Khribin levelled the score on the night with a diving header and his fourth of the tournament as Al Hilal eventually advanced to the last eight following a 4-2 aggregate win, before the Riyadh club saw off the United Arab Emirates’ Al Ain in the quarter-finals.

Back on international duty, the striker ran



the show against Qatar in the penultimate game of the third round of qualifiers as a goal either side of half time propelled his national team to a 3-1 victory, confirming their status as genuine contenders for the top positions in the group.

Syria then booked their place in the two-legged play-off against Australia with a last-minute draw against Iran.

A 1-1 draw in the first leg in Melaka set up a thrilling tie in the return leg in Sydney, but Khrbin would miss out on the clash having picked up a yellow card.

There was heartbreak for Syria, though, as an extra-time Tim Cahill goal settled the affair for the Socceroos, but Khrbin ended the qualifying campaign on ten goals. Only four players scored more.

Khrbin's performances over the year convinced Al Hilal to splash out US\$5 million to make his loan deal permanent. And the Syrian would raise the level of his performances to even greater heights in the weeks to come in the AFC Champions League semi-final against Iran's Persepolis.

The thermometer was finally dipping below 40 degrees in Abu Dhabi, a sign that the long, hot summer was finally giving way to a marginally cooler autumn.

Tension was in the air at Mohamed bin Zayed Stadium in the late September evening as Al Hilal players sat in the dugout preparing for their final training session ahead of the big game in the first leg against the Tehran side.

Players chatted away by the touchline, tying their laces or taking sips of water. A few seconds later, he emerged from the tunnel nonchalantly juggling a ball as he walked onto the pitch, unbothered by the weight of expectation.

The two semi-final clashes against Persepolis would see the Syrian produce some of the finest individual performances witnessed

Left & Above Left
FIFA World Cup 2018 qualifiers

Above 2017 AFC Annual Awards

"WITH THE CLUB AND THE NATIONAL TEAM, WE DID OUR BEST, BUT IT WAS NOT MEANT FOR US TO WIN THE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TITLE AND QUALIFY FOR THE WORLD CUP FINALS."

in the 2017 campaign.

In the first leg, Khrbin started with a well-placed header, then added two more goals in the second half to complete a 'perfect hat-trick': a header and a goal with each foot to hand Al Hilal a 4-0 winning margin that all but sealed their place in the continental final.

The two sides faced off again three weeks later in Muscat. Persepolis scored early, but Khrbin calmed the Al Hilal faithful's nerves with a coolly taken 'Panenka' penalty kick.

Persepolis took the lead again, before the number 77 added a fifth goal against the Iranians over the two legs to end the semi-final stage on nine goals, level with Shanghai SIPG's Hulk at the top of the competition's scoring charts.

The Saudis set up an AFC Champions League final showdown with Japan's Urawa Red Diamonds as they looked to erase the ghosts of their 2014 final defeat to Western Sydney Wanderers.

Al Hilal fell behind to an early goal in the first leg at King Fahd International Stadium but Khrbin clawed his team back into the game by restoring parity with a goal that would ultimately see him pick up the AFC Champions League top scorer award.

Unfortunately for Khrbin, his high-scoring campaign ended on a negative note as a 1-1 home draw set up a difficult task in the second

leg in Japan. With the match still goalless at the hour-mark, Khrbin was stretchered off with an injury and Rafael Silva compounded Al Hilal's misery with a late strike as The Blues suffered a second defeat in the final in four years.

Had you asked any Al Hilal fan what they made of Khrbin's transfer fee after his derby exploits back in May, you would have got the same answer every single time: "Worth every penny".

Seven months on from that night in Riyadh, ask any 'Hilali' the same question and the answer would be: "It was undoubtedly a bargain".

"It is a stepping stone to bigger things," Khrbin's statement from 20 months ago rings loud and clear as he embraced Omar Abdulrahman, who he succeeded as the AFC Player of the Year, at the AFC Annual Awards gala in Bangkok in November.

"I apologise to the fans I could not make happy, we will do better in the future," said Khrbin upon picking up his award. The striker, having checked the most prestigious individual award off the list, remains determined to achieve collective glory.

"With the club and the national team, we did our best, but it was not meant for us to win the Champions League title and qualify for the World Cup finals. We hope that next year we can do better."

One of Khrbin's next aims will be to help Syria do well in the UAE as they play in their sixth AFC Asian Cup in early 2019.

"We will try to do our best for the Syrian national team. We play and fight to bring happiness to our people. That is our main target.

"We have determination in matches, but the determination is stronger when you have people who are hungry for the happiness and joy. Our people deserve to be happy."



ACL ACTION SET TO RETURN

A TOTAL OF 46 TEAMS FROM 20 MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS LEARNED THEIR OPPONENTS FOR THE 17TH EDITION OF THE AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE AFTER THE DRAW FOR THE GROUP STAGE AND PLAY-OFFS WAS HELD IN KUALA LUMPUR IN DECEMBER.

Ten years after winning their first AFC Champions League title, Urawa Red Diamonds were crowned kings of the continent once more following a 2-1 aggregate win over Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal in November.

The Japanese side will not be present at the 2018 edition of the competition, but at least four former winners will line up in the group stage, where inaugural champions Al Ain will also hope to join them should they navigate the play-off round.

Among the other teams still aiming to secure their qualification to Asia's premier club competition are 2017 semi-finalists Shanghai SIPG and their Chinese domestic rivals Tianjin Quanjian, as well as former continental champions Suwon Samsung Bluewings of Korea Republic.

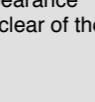
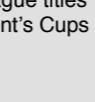
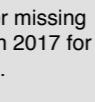
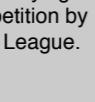
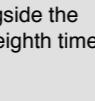
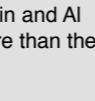
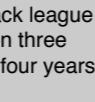
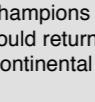
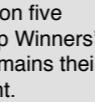
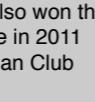
In the West, the Islamic Republic of Iran's Zobahan, Qatar's Al Gharafa and Uzbekistan pair Pakhtakor and Nasaf will all be looking to join the 23 teams that have already confirmed their passage to the tournament.

The group stage kicks off in mid-February and culminates in mid-April ahead of the two-legged Round of 16 ties in May. Following a three-month break, the tournament will resume with the quarter-finals in August, before the semi-finals take place in October.

Once again, the final will pit East against West in early November, where the latter will aim to end the dominance of the former and claim a first continental title since Al Sadd won the competition back in 2011.

Record numbers at last year's two-legged final was proof of the competition's growing popularity, and the stage is set for yet another thrilling edition of the AFC Champions League.



How They Qualified				History			Did You Know?			How They Qualified		
Team	Country	Group	Qualification	Team	Country	Group	Did You Know?	Team	Country	Group	Qualification	
AL JAZIRA 	United Arab Emirates	GROUP A	Al Jazira claimed a second UAE Pro League title in the 2016-17 season to secure a ninth AFC Champions League appearance after finishing 11 points clear of the second-placed team.	THE ABU DHABI CLUB 	The Abu Dhabi club have developed into one of the UAE's dominant forces in the past decade, winning two league titles as well as three President's Cups and a League Cup.	THE ABU DHABI CLUB 	Al Jazira advanced to the FIFA Club World Cup semi-finals after beating Asian champions Urawa Red Diamonds 1-0 in the quarter-finals at the end of 2017, before defeat to Real Madrid.	AL WASL 	Arguably the greatest player to play the beautiful game, Argentine superstar Diego Maradona had just over a year in charge of Al Wasl between 2011 and 2012.	AL WASL 	Al Wasl's most successful period came between 1981 and 1992, when the Dubai club won five league championships, but the last time they won the title was in the 2006-07 campaign.	A runners-up finish in the UAE Pro League saw Al Wasl secure a return to the AFC Champions League for the first time in a decade for what will be only their second appearance in the competition.
AL AHLI 	Saudi Arabia	GROUP A	Jeddah club Al Ahli secured their berth in the continental competition following a runners-up finish in the 2016-17 Saudi Pro League.	AL AHILI 	Al Ahli will be appearing in their eighth AFC Champions League group stage with a runners-up finish in 2012 their best performance to date, while they also finished second in the 1985/86 Asian Club Championship.	AL AHILI 	Prolific Syrian marksman Omar Al Soma, who netted five times on Al Ahli's march to the 2017 quarter-finals, has won the domestic league's top scorer award for the past three years.	AL HILAL 	Since the AFC Champions League was launched in 2002, Al Hilal have played in all but two of the editions, while no team has played more games in the competition than the Riyadh club.	AL HILAL 	Al Hilal are the most successful side in Saudi Arabia and have also won the Asian Club Championship, the Asian Cup Winners' Cup and the Asian Super Cup two times apiece.	The 2017 AFC Champions League runners-up Al Hilal booked their place in the competition for a record 14th time after winning the Saudi Pro League title, also for a record 14th time.
TRACTORSAZI TABRIZ 	IR Iran	GROUP A	A third-place finish in the Iranian Pro League was enough to guarantee a return to a fifth AFC Champions League after missing out on the competition in 2017 for the first time since 2012.	TRACTOR SAZI 	Tractorsazi are yet to win the Iranian league but have come runners-up three times and won the Hazfi Cup, in 2014.	TRACTOR SAZI 	The side from northwestern Iran appeared in four successive AFC Champions Leagues from 2013 and progressed from the group stage for the first time in 2016 before exiting at the first knockout round.	ESTEGHLAL 	More than 76,000 spectators turned out at Esteghlal's Azadi Stadium to watch their 1-1 draw with the United Arab Emirates' Al Ahli in last year's group stage in what was the highest attendance in the 2017 competition.	ESTEGHLAL 	Like group rivals Al Hilal, Esteghlal won the Asian Club Championship twice, but the eight-time Iranian league winners' best performance in the AFC Champions League was a semi-final appearance in 2013.	Iranian powerhouse Esteghlal finished second in their domestic league and are set to appear in the tournament for the ninth time.
AL DUHAIL 	Qatar	GROUP B	Formerly known as Lekhiya, Al Duhail acquired and merged with El Jaish in 2017 after qualifying for the continental competition by winning the Qatar Stars League.	AL DUHAIL 	Formed in 2009 as Lekhiya, the Doha-based club have won five of the last seven domestic league titles as well as the 2016 Emir Cup.	AL DUHAIL 	While Lekhiya appeared in the last five AFC Champions Leagues – twice progressing to the quarter-finals – it is El Jaish, semi-finalists in 2016, who went the furthest on the continent prior to their merger.	AL RAYYAN 	No player created more than Rodrigo Tabata's four goals in the 2017 group stage although, despite also scoring four times, the Qatar international was unable to steer his side to a first knockout round on the continent.	AL RAYYAN 	Al Rayyan celebrated their 50th anniversary in 2017, just a year after picking up their first league title in over two decades and eighth in total.	A third-place finish in the Qatar Stars League sees Michael Laudrup's Al Rayyan return to the AFC Champions League for the eighth time.
AL WAHDA 	United Arab Emirates	GROUP B	After winning the President's Cup for just the second time – and first since 2000 – Al Wahda ensured they would line up alongside the continent's elite for the eighth time.	AL WAHDA 	The Abu Dhabi club have been crowned UAE champions on four occasions, while since the turn of the millennium only Al Ain and Al Ahli have picked up more than their three league titles.	AL WAHDA 	Al Wahda's best performance on the continent came in 2007, when current captain Ismail Matar was part of a side that advanced to the semi-finals.	JEONBUK HYUNDAI MOTORS 	Jeonbuk's last appearance in the continental competition came in November 2016, when they drew 1-1 in Al Ain to wrap up a 3-2 aggregate win to be crowned kings of the continent.	JEONBUK HYUNDAI MOTORS 	Five league titles since 2009 makes Jeonbuk undoubtedly Korea Republic's dominant force, while two AFC Champions League crowns – in 2006 and 2016 – puts them among Asia's elite clubs.	Two-time AFC Champions League winners Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors won Korea Republic's K-League Classic to ensure their bright green shirts will be on display in the competition once more.
LOKOMOTIV 	Uzbekistan	GROUP B	The Tashkent side wrapped up their second successive Uzbek League title to qualify for the AFC Champions League for the fourth time in a row.	LOKOMOTIV 	Formed in 2002, Lokomotiv have developed into the dominant force in Uzbekistan in recent times as, in addition to back-to-back league titles, they have also won three Uzbek Cups in the past four years.	LOKOMOTIV 	Lokomotiv achieved a best ever quarter-final berth in the 2016 AFC Champions League, seeing off continental giants Al Hilal along the way, before defeat to eventual runners-up Al Ain.	KITCHEE 	Kitchee will become just the second team from Hong Kong to compete in the AFC Champions League after domestic rivals Eastern SC became the first in 2017.	KITCHEE 	Founded in 1931, Kitchee have won Hong Kong's top flight eight times and the FA Cup on four occasions, while their best performance on the continent was reaching the AFC Cup semi-finals in 2014.	Kitchee were crowned Hong Kong champions for the third time in four years and will next take to the AFC Champions League stage for the first time.
PERSEPOLIS 	IR Iran	GROUP C	Persepolis won their 10th top-flight Iranian league title by nine points from Tehran rivals Esteghlal to ensure the 2017 AFC Champions League semi-finalists would return for another shot at the continental championship.	PERSEPOLIS 	No team has won more league championships in Iran than Persepolis, while they have also won the Hazfi Cup on five occasions. An Asian Cup Winners' Cup success in 1991 remains their only title on the continent.	PERSEPOLIS 	Mehdi Taremi was one of just five players to score a hat-trick in last year's AFC Champions League, when his treble against Al Wahda helped Persepolis advance to the last 16.	KAWASAKI FRONTALE 	Only Shanghai SIPG's Hulk matched Kengo Nakamura's seven assists in last year's competition as the playmaker played a major role in a nine-match unbeaten streak until quarter-final elimination.	KAWASAKI FRONTALE 	The 2017 J.League title was not only their first top-flight championship success, it was Kawasaki's first ever major honour. The side also reached the quarter-finals on the continent for the third time.	Kawasaki Frontale won the J.League for the first time in their history to ensure they will compete in back-to-back AFC Champions Leagues for just the second time.
AL SADD 	Qatar	GROUP C	Al Sadd's record 16th Emir Cup success following a 2-1 victory over Al Rayyan was enough to ensure a return to the continental competition for the first time since 2015.	AL SADD 	The Doha side are by far Qatar's most successful team, with 13 league titles and 16 Emir Cups to their name, while they also won the AFC Champions League in 2011 and the now defunct Asian Club Championship in 1989.	AL SADD 	Since Al Sadd were crowned continental champions following a penalty shootout victory over Korea Republic's Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors, no team from West Asia has lifted the AFC Champions League.	ULSAN HYUNDAI 	Ulsan were unbeaten on the continent in 2012 and went on an incredible nine-match winning run to lift the trophy for the first and, to date, only time.	ULSAN HYUNDAI 	Two-time K-League Classic champions Ulsan's FA Cup success was the first time they had won their domestic cup competition, but the 2012 AFC Champions League victory remains the finest moment in their history.	AFC Champions League winners in 2012, Ulsan Hyundai lifted the Korean FA Cup to secure their sixth appearance in the competition.

		HOW THEY QUALIFIED	HISTORY	DID YOU KNOW?
MELBOURNE VICTORY	Australia GROUP F	Melbourne Victory finished runners-up in the 2017 A-League season to book a spot in the AFC Champions League for the sixth time.	The side from Victoria State have won more A-League titles (3) than any other side, while only Sydney FC can match their three A-League Grand Final triumphs.	In their last appearance on the continent, Melbourne advanced to the knockout rounds for the first time, where a narrow defeat to eventual winners Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors ended their finest performance in Asia.
GUANGZHOU EVERGRANDE	China GROUP G	A seventh successive Chinese Super League title sees perennial qualifiers Guangzhou Evergrande ready to mix it with the continent's finest once more in 2018.	In addition to their recent domination of the Chinese top flight, Guangzhou have won two Chinese FA Cups and won the AFC Champions League in 2013 and 2015.	Guangzhou's past three head coaches – Marcello Lippi, Luiz Felipe Scolari and current boss Fabio Cannavaro – have all lifted the FIFA World Cup as either a head coach or a player.
CEREZO OSAKA	Japan GROUP G	Japanese club Cerezo Osaka lifted the Emperor's Cup on January 1, securing their second major title, after defeating Yokohama F. Marinos.	The team, originally called Yanmar Diesel, started in 1957 but began life as Cerezo Osaka in 1993.	The team name Cerezo is Spanish for cherry team, which is also the flower of Osaka City. Their famous pink shirts reflect the cherry blossom flowers that the name is based on.
JEJU UNITED	Korea Republic GROUP G	Jeju United finished second in the K-League Classic to advance to their second successive AFC Champions League and third overall.	Known for their striking orange and white strips, Jeju's finest hour came in winning their domestic league back in 1989, while their Round of 16 showing in 2017 was their best performance on the continent.	Jeju's home base in the city of Seogwipo, on Jeju Island, makes them by far and away the most southerly club in Korea Republic.
BURIRAM UNITED	Thailand GROUP G	After winning the Thai Premier League on three successive occasions between 2013 and 2015, Buriram United managed to wrestle the title back from Muangthong United in 2017 to ensure a return to the competition.	The club from northeastern Thailand dominated the domestic scene between 2010 and 2015 and will now return to the AFC Champions League for the sixth time in seven years.	Buriram's best performance on the continent came in 2013 when they advanced all the way to the quarter-finals before defeat at the hands of Iranian side Esteghlal.
SYDNEY FC	Australia GROUP H	Sydney FC won the A-League Grand Final for the third time in their history to book a return to the AFC Champions League.	Formed in 2004, Sydney's three A-League Grand Finals is a shared record, while their last appearance on the continent – in 2016 – saw them reach the last 16 for the first time.	Italian great Alessandro Del Piero is among the side's former players, with the FIFA World Cup winner spending two years with the Sydney club between 2012 and 2014.
SHANGHAI SHENHUA	China GROUP H	After enduring a disappointing Chinese Super League campaign, Shanghai Shenhua defeated city rivals Shanghai SIPG in the Chinese FA Cup final to claim AFC Champions League qualification.	The 2017 FA Cup success was Shanghai Shenhua's first major honour since winning the same competition in 1998. They return to the continental competition looking to advance beyond the group stage for the first time.	Wu Jingui will become the first head coach from China to lead a Chinese side out in the AFC Champions League since Gong Lei did so for Guizhou Renhe back in the 2014 edition.
KASHIMA ANTHERS	Japan GROUP H	A runners-up finish in the 2017 J.League was sufficient to see Kashima Antlers return to the tournament for the second successive year and eighth time overall.	Kashima won three consecutive J.League titles between 2007 and 2009 in what was the most successful period in their history, but a quarter-final appearance in 2008 remains the best they have managed on the continent.	Eight league titles since the formation of the J.League means Kashima have won at least five more domestic league championships than any other side.



GREAT EXPECTATIONS

AUSTRALIA STRIKER SAMANTHA KERR HAS ENJOYED A RECORD-BREAKING 2017 AND THE RECENTLY CROWNED AFC WOMEN'S PLAYER OF THE YEAR NOW HAS HER SIGHTS FIRMLY FIXED ON THIS YEAR'S AFC WOMEN'S ASIAN CUP IN JORDAN AND THE 2019 FIFA WOMEN'S WORLD CUP.

By: Paul Murphy Photos: Getty Images/Asian Football Confederation/Jeffrey Auger - Sky Blue FC

Samantha Kerr has come a long way in the nine years since she made her W-League debut at the age of 15. But the Australian has arguably come an even longer way since suffering a serious foot injury in 2015 that led her to consider quitting the game.

Now 24, Kerr came back stronger than ever, and recognition for a sensational 2017 came in the form of the AFC Women's Player of the Year award.

It was a year that began well as she

received the Julie Dolan award for the W-League's outstanding performer in the 2016-17 season with her club Perth Glory. And it ended with Kerr breaking an Australian scoring record as she became the first player to find the back of the net in six consecutive Matildas' matches.

In between, Kerr became the United States' National Women's Soccer League's (NWSL) all-time leading scorer at Sky Blue FC, and was top scorer in Australia's triumph at the inaugural Tournament of Nations, where they saw off heavyweight opponents in the USA, Japan and Brazil.

"At a team level, winning the Tournament





of Nations," said Kerr, when asked to identify the highlights of an incredible year. "Beating the USA was huge but then we backed it up by beating Japan, who are still one of the best teams in the world, and then beating Brazil 6-1.

"That whole tournament was just huge, and, as a team, we finished this year with seven straight wins and we lost just one game in 2017, so it has been a great year for the Matildas and we still think we can get better."

"On a personal level, beating the record in the USA (all-time top scorer in NWSL). At the time, I didn't really think about the record and it didn't really sink in, but now looking back it's something that I'm really proud of and being the all-time leading goalscorer in the NWSL seems a bit surreal being so young and really only playing 3-4 years in the league after being injured the other two."

Kerr completed her record of netting in six straight games as the Matildas saw off China 3-0 and 5-1 in two matches in Australia in November as the Matildas impressively dismantled the eight-time AFC Women's Asian Cup winners.

"I wouldn't say I was surprised," Kerr said. "We expect to win against most teams now. There would probably be only one or two teams in the world that we don't think we're

favourites against. I might be biased being on the team, but I honestly think we're one of the best teams in the world."

"We have everything now. We have speed, we have skill, we are technically very good. We hadn't seen China in a while, but going by other results that they have had, we thought we



would go in with a strong chance."

In addition to winning the AFC gong, Kerr also made the initial 10-strong shortlist for the FIFA Women's World Player of the Year award, but missed out on being one of the three finalists, who were the USA's Carli Lloyd, Venezuelan Deyna Castellanos and Holland's

Lieke Martens.

"Honestly, it's just an honour to win it [the AFC award]," Kerr said. "When I found out I wasn't nominated in the final three [for the FIFA award], it just motivated me more. But it was a huge honour to be nominated in the top 10."

It would be an exaggeration to say that Kerr's career has been a slow-burner given that she is still only 24. She scored in the 2010 AFC Women's Asian Cup final at the age of 16 and has twice won the FFA Under-20 Player of the Year award.

Kerr may have been around for nine years, but she has had to overcome serious injuries to stay on track. Most recently, ruptured foot ligaments kept her out of action from November 2015 to mid-2016, while she had to have a knee reconstruction in 2011 and another knee operation in 2014.

"I can't put my finger on it," Kerr said, when quizzed on her upturn in fortunes this year. "The reason I started playing football is because I love it and I've just tried with every game to go out there and play with a smile on my face."

"I will say that I've tried to be more of a professional. I've battled some injuries over the years so taking care of my body and all those kinds of things – the one percenters that have really added up and made a

difference to my game."

"Honestly, I've just grown up and I think I'm at that age now where I realise that this is my life, this is my job, and I've taken that completely seriously."

Although she has elevated her game to new levels, there is no danger of Kerr becoming complacent and she has just set her sights even higher.

"I guess up until this year I never really thought of winning World Player of the Year but I guess now that I've been nominated and been so close, I want to win that one day," Kerr admitted.

"But, like I said, team things are more important than individual awards, so my main goal is to win a World Cup with the Matildas and get a medal at the Olympics."

With an amazing 2017 now in the past, there are new priorities for the Australian national side in 2018, beginning with the AFC Women's Asian Cup in Jordan in April ahead of the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup in France.

Kerr is incredibly the third Australian in four years to lift the AFC Women's Player of the Year award. Katrina Gorry (2014) and Caitlin Foord (2016) are international teammates who form part of a golden generation that should be reaching its peak years in 2019.

"The most important thing (in 2018) is the

Left 2017 AFC Annual Awards

Bottom Left National Women's Soccer League

Top Right In action against China

Middle & Bottom Right 2017 Tournament of Nations

While many budding young Australian footballers may be looking to Samantha Kerr as an inspiration, it was an American that had the biggest impact on Kerr as a player and a person.

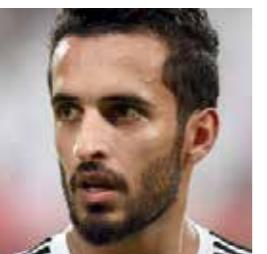
"I think I've said it before, but Abby Wambach, which is weird because she's a US player," Kerr said when asked to identify the key inspiration in her career. "But I played with her in my first pro-league team in Western New York, and she made more of an impact on me personally rather than as a footballer."

"She was a great teammate, and I don't have one bad word to say about her. When I leave football, that's what I want people to say about me. She just really motivated me to be a better player and also a better teammate."

Wambach's influence could certainly be seen in 2017, as Kerr undoubtedly became a much better player.

There is surely more to come as Kerr and the Matildas aim for their second AFC Asian Cup title. At the age of just 16, Kerr netted Australia's only goal in the 2010 final against DPR Korea, with the Matildas eventually winning on penalties. In Jordan, she will be eight years older and wiser.

On the evidence of the last 12 months, she will also be significantly better than the precocious talent of 2010.



THE LITTLE PRINCE

ALI MABKHOUT HAS BEEN LIKENED TO ONE OF HIS COUNTRY'S GREATEST EVER PLAYERS AND, HAVING ALREADY BROKEN RECORDS FOR CLUB SIDE AL JAZIRA, THE UAE FORWARD HEADS INTO THE COMING 12 MONTHS AND THE 2019 AFC ASIAN CUP ON HOME SOIL WITH FURTHER RECORDS IN HIS SIGHTS.



By: Wael Jaber Photos: Getty Images/Lagardère Sports/Al Jazira



A collective cheer could be heard everywhere around Abu Dhabi as the final whistle sounded at Singapore's Jurong Stadium. It was Saturday afternoon on the 28th of October, 1989, and many Emiratis had opted to stay at home.

Adnan Al Talyani rose highest to head in the equaliser against Korea Republic to take the Whites to their first ever FIFA World Cup. 'The Prince' remains arguably the United Arab Emirates' best footballer of all time.

Twelve months later, there were reminiscent celebrations at one Abu Dhabi household as Ahmed Mabkhout and his family welcomed baby Ali to life. Little did they know, that their new-born would grow to become 'Little Al Talyani'.

Hundreds of camera flashes went off as the two number 7s made their way side by side onto the pitch at Zayed Sport City Stadium, not far from Ali's birthplace.

For the recently crowned Ballon d'Or winner, Cristiano Ronaldo, this was the start of the road towards adding one more medal to his ever-growing cabinet. But it was the home side's number 7 who is reaching the zenith of his own successful, albeit very different, footballing career.

Ali Mabkhout had scored the only goal of the match against AFC Champions League winners Urawa Red Diamonds to put his boyhood club Al Jazira face-to-face with European giants Real Madrid in the semi-final of the FIFA Club World Cup. It was a fairytale moment for Mabkhout.

Al Jazira led the European champions for an hour before eventually falling to goals from Ronaldo and Gareth Bale.

Mabkhout was a constant menace for Real

Madrid defenders and, despite not scoring on the night, he earned special praise from opponents' manager Zinedine Zidane after the game. "They have two quality players, Mabkhout and Romarinho, who gave our defence a tough test," said the former World Cup winner.

The Little Prince could well follow in the

footsteps of Al Talyani, who spent his entire career at one club. "Al Jazira is where I feel most comfortable, it is my home and I am not thinking about leaving," says Mabkhout, who came through the youth ranks at Mohamed bin Zayed Stadium and has been playing for the first team since 2008.

"I received the ball and immediately hit it into the bottom left corner. I don't remember which season it was, but I do remember it was against Al Dhafra," says Mabkhout, trying to recall his first goal in Al Jazira colours.

"I don't have a great memory. I started documenting my goals, but then I got busy and stopped," he adds. The goal was in the 2008/09 season.

It is not difficult to see how Mabkhout could forget the details of his goals. Since that strike against Al Dhafra, the 27-year-old has broken all sorts of records as he became his club's all-time top goal scorer and the UAE Pro League's record scorer with an impressive 107 goals in 161 games.

Eight years on from his first goal, Mabkhout had another date with history against Al Dhafra. Going into the final match of the 2016/17 league season with 31 goals, the striker was looking to surpass Ghana's Asamoah Gyan's all-time record of the same number in a single season.

Within 21 minutes, he had achieved his objective, before adding a confirmation goal in the second half to end the season on 33 goals.

He may not remember his first Al Jazira goal well, and he has no idea how many international goals he has scored either: "I don't know exactly, but it must be above 30", but Mabkhout has a vivid memory of the night he opened his account for his country.

Mabkhout broke his international duck in style with four goals in a 6-2 friendly win against Bahrain in 2012. The first of his

goals was a well-taken header from an Omar Abdulrahman cross, almost identical to Al Talyani's goal that took the UAE to Italia 90.

Mabkhout and Abdulrahman played side-by-side across the different age groups for the UAE. Together with 2015 AFC Player of the Year Ahmed Khalil, the trio formed the core of the 'Mahdi boys', the second Emirati golden generation brought up by coach Mahdi Ali from the U-19s through the first team.

In 2009, Mabkhout was the youngest member of the squad that reached the quarter-finals of the FIFA U-20 World Cup in Egypt, before travelling to London for the 2012 Olympic Games with the same group of players.

"My wish is to see my teammates and coaching staff become the first team," said Mabkhout ahead of London 2012. His wish would come true after Ali was appointed to head the senior national team, and he immediately called up the core of that U-23 side.

By then, Mabkhout had established himself as a first-team player at his club. His appearances in Al Jazira colours went up from four in his debut season to 24 matches in the 2012/13 season, when he hit double-digits for the first time, ending the season on 11 league goals.

With his reputation growing inside the UAE,

Left
2015 AFC Asian Cup

Above
2017 FIFA Club World Cup

his tally.

When he became his club side's all-time top goal scorer last season, he broke a record that was held by former Brazil international Ricardo Oliveira, who Mabkhout would eventually replace as the club's main man up front.

The one Al Jazira player that made the biggest influence on Mabkhout, though, was Montenegrin Mirko Vucinic, who arrived from Juventus in the summer of 2014 and, despite several injuries, averaged nearly a goal every game.

"Of all the forwards I saw at the club, Vucinic was the best. He was a true poacher in front of goal. I had a good relationship with him and he always gave me advice," continues Mabkhout. "I learned a lot about how to move from him. Vucinic made scoring goals look so easy."

In his eight years as a professional footballer, Mabkhout has conquered all domestic titles, established himself as one of the best strikers in the continent and led Al Jazira to the FIFA Club World Cup semi-final as the first Emirati team to achieve that feat.

But the 27-year-old's ambition knows no limit. Going far in the AFC Champions League and winning a first AFC Asian Cup trophy for his country in a year's time are next on his checklist.

THE NEXT EPISODE

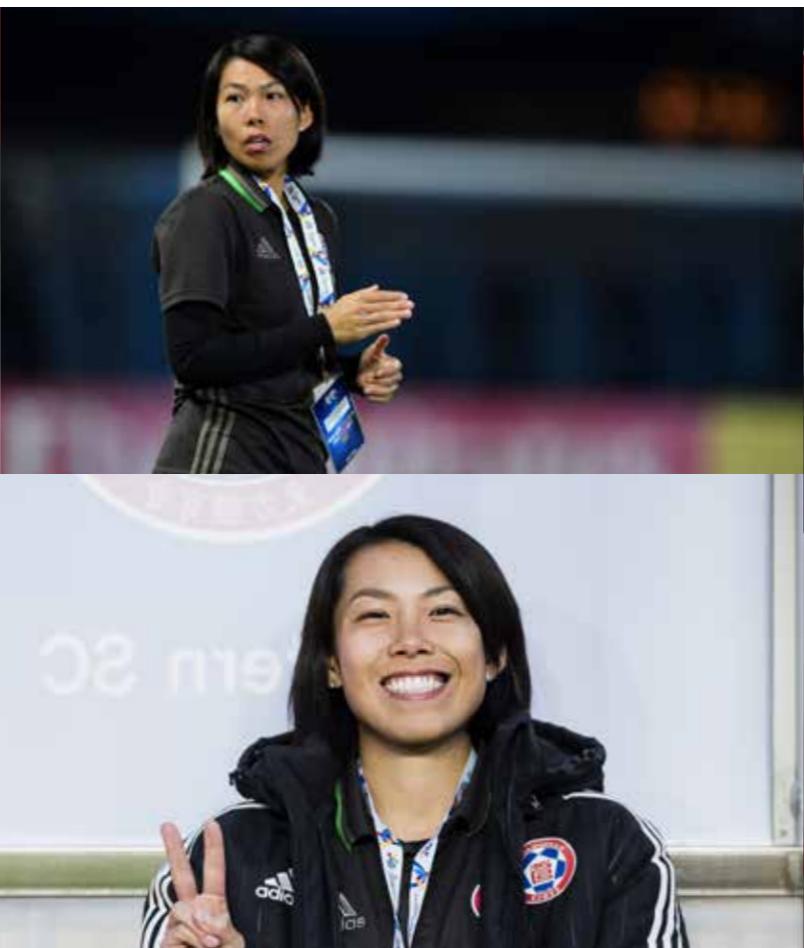
WITH A TOP-FLIGHT LEAGUE TITLE AND AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE EXPERIENCE TO HER NAME, 2016 AFC WOMEN'S COACH OF THE YEAR CHAN YUEN-TING HAS ENJOYED A REMARKABLE CAREER TO DATE. STILL ONLY 29, THE RECORD-BREAKING COACH OFFERS HER VIEW ON THE WOMEN'S GAME AND REVEALS HER PLANS FOR THE FUTURE.

By: Peter Alsop Photos: Lagardère Sports

When Chan Yuen-ting became the first women to lead a men's team to a league title in April 2016, the Hong Kong native attracted global headlines in a year that culminated in her being named the AFC Women's Coach of the Year. The timing was perfect because, not only had Chan guided Hong Kong Premier League side Eastern SC to their first top-flight championship since the mid-90s, the

then 28-year-old had done so at a time when Hong Kong's coefficient ranking guaranteed a berth in the AFC Champions League for the first time. The fledgling coach would now be handed the chance to test her wits against some of the best coaches in Asia. Eastern were drawn in the 2017 group stage alongside a pair of two-time continental champions in China's Guangzhou Evergrande and Korea Republic's Suwon Samsung Bluewings, as well as Japan's Kawasaki Frontale, who would go on to reach the quarter-finals and win the 2017 J.League title. As fate would have it, Eastern's





competition debut saw them take the short journey into mainland China to face 2013 and 2015 winners Guangzhou at Tianhe Stadium, meaning Chan would walk her team out side-by-side with FIFA World Cup-winning coach Luiz Felipe Scolari, whose charges included Brazilian international and now Barcelona midfielder Paulinho.

"I spoke with Scolari a few times in Guangzhou and in Hong Kong, before and after the press conferences," recalled Chan.

"I was impressed because he had done a lot of research on Eastern and knew everything, which surprised me as we're just a small club. But it taught me that attention to detail makes perfect."

Chan's game plan was significantly hindered by two early red cards as the minnows' task was made all the more difficult and the clash eventually ended 7-0 to the hosts.

But Eastern returned to Hong Kong to claim a highly commendable 1-1 draw with Kawasaki in the second round of fixtures, before four more defeats followed as the Hong Kong debutants exited at the first hurdle.

"The ACL gave me a very significant experience in my coaching life as it's a much higher level," admitted Chan.

"To see players like Paulinho, who you

normally just see on TV, standing in front of you is quite strange. He can control games. He gave his best in China and changed some perceptions about the league.

"Over the six games, even though we lost, I could see all the players gave it everything. We prepared a lot – with different tactics and formations – but the level was so different."

On the back of the AFC Champions League exit, Eastern lost their grip on the Hong Kong Premier League title after being beaten in the final match of the season by rivals Kitchee.

The defeat was a bitter pill to swallow for Chan, who had almost followed up her historic maiden league success by going a whole season unbeaten, only to lose the last match and, with it, concede the title.

It had been a whirlwind 18 months since being appointed as head coach of Eastern and Chan decided the time was now right to step down from her role, while remaining part of the coaching staff at the club.

"I wanted to sit back and focus on learning," the now 29-year-old said. "After the ACL I could really see my weaknesses, so I thought by taking a step back I could see things from a different angle and learn from the other coaches."

"The attention [from being a women coach] was sometimes tiring, but I always tried to just focus on myself and do the best for my

team. It's not important what people on the outside say, it's just important that you do your job, improve your team and improve your players."

Chan has continued to play a day-to-day role with Eastern when in her home city, but has also travelled as she continues to train for her Pro Licence. She recently spent time at Lilleshall Hall – one of England's renowned National Sports Centres.

As an established coach on the continent, Chan was invited to work as an analyst at the AFC U-16 Women's Championship in Chonburi, Thailand, in September, allowing her to see the game from yet another angle.

In particular, the experience offered an opportunity of a greater insight into the women's game, while also highlighting the style of football played by different nations across Asia.

"It was my first time being an analyst at a competition, and it was really different from being a coach in Hong Kong because you're focusing on a whole tournament and you see the different cultures of the teams."

"I really like Japan's style of play. In Chonburi, I could see the balance of their team – in defence and in attack. It's amazing, whether it's men's football, women's football or youth football, they always keep the same style, short passing with good combination

play.

"You can see that physically teams are getting stronger, the transition of play is quicker and the technique is getting much better."

"Even though they are just 15 or 16, they play the country's style. China always want possession, Japan use combination play, DPR Korea are more direct."

That tournament was won by DPR Korea, but the East Asians will not be present at the next big competition on the women's football calendar, the AFC Women's Asian Cup in Jordan in April.

Chan admits she would like to attend the continental tournament but remains unsure if her schedule will allow her the time, while she remains upbeat about the future of women's football across Asia.

"[At the 2016 AFC Annual Awards ceremony], I spoke with [AFC Technical Director] Andy Roxburgh about the improvements in the women's game, particularly since Bai Lili became head of the department," she revealed.

"There have been a lot of projects and instructor courses for women in many countries and you can see that physically teams are getting stronger, the technique is better and the transition of play is quicker."

"I think China can maybe challenge again

Far Left
2016 AFC Annual Awards

Left, Above & Below
2017 AFC Champions League

professional women's league in China and the level of the game is higher again.

"Southeast Asian teams are also getting stronger too and, in West Asian countries, although football is not as developed, hosting tournaments will see more media focus on them, so the Asian Cup should raise the profile of the game there."

When it comes to her own future, Chan remains focused on achieving her coaching badges in the immediate future before deciding the next route to take.

Having won a league title and coached in the AFC Champions League before the age of 30, she already boasts a hugely impressive resume.

Young, ambitious and always looking to better herself, there seems little doubt that wherever Chan winds up, she will have plenty to offer any future employees.

"After I finish my Pro Licence I'll try to look for opportunities in other countries, where I can learn at a higher level and bring my experience back to Hong Kong."

"I've already had offers to coach women's teams in China, Iran and the UAE, but it wasn't the best option just now."

"For me, it's not important if I work in men or women's football, but I'd like to work in Japan or, if I go outside Asia, maybe in England or Spain."



INDONESIAN ICON

WIDODO PUTRO WROTE HIS NAME INTO INDONESIA'S FOOTBALLING FOLKLORE WHEN HE SCORED THEIR FIRST EVER AFC ASIAN CUP GOAL IN SPECTACULAR FASHION. JUST OVER 21 YEARS AGO SINCE THE GARUDA MADE THEIR DEBUT ON THE CONTINENT, PUTRO LOOKS BACK ON HIS STUNNING STRIKE.

By: Peter Alsop Photo: Lagardère Sports

The start of 2018 will see Indonesia return to continental action, with two club sides guaranteed a spot in either of the AFC's two biggest club competitions – the AFC Champions League and the AFC Cup.

After finishing second in the Indonesia's Liga 1, Bali United are one of those teams. Entered into the AFC Champions League qualifying rounds, the Tridatu Warriors will join the group stage of the AFC Cup should they fail to advance.

The man who almost steered the side to a second league title was Widodo Putro, a former Indonesia international who scored the most famous goal in the country's history.

Back in 1996, Indonesia topped a qualifying group comprising Malaysia and India to progress to the AFC Asian Cup for the first time.

Held in the United Arab Emirates, The Garuda were paired in a group with the hosts, Kuwait and Korea Republic, but showed no sign of nerves against more established opposition in the Kuwaitis in their opening fixture in Abu Dhabi.

The West Asians had won the competition in 1980 and finished second and third in the tournaments either side of their victorious campaign, but were stunned in the first half as Indonesia raced into a two-goal lead.

The Southeast Asians would open the scoring in the 20th minute with one of the greatest goals in AFC Asian Cup history.

Ronny Wabia broke free down the right and floated the ball in, slightly behind Putro, who adjusted his body and perfectly executed a fabulous overhead kick beyond goalkeeper Khaled Al Fadhl before reeling off in celebration after writing his name into Indonesia's footballing history.

"I had to make a quick decision when the ball came across because the position of the ball was not ideal for me to go for the header," recalled Putro of his finest moment.

"Of course, I felt really happy to score as it lifted the team's morale and gave us more

confidence going forward."

Making their sixth appearance in the competition, Kuwait had little answer to their opponents, who had seen 10 AFC Asian Cups pass by without their presence.

Five minutes before the interval, Indonesia doubled their advantage when Putro outpaced the Kuwait defence and, after his initial effort was thwarted by Al Fadhl, Wabia was on hand to rifle home the rebound from 20 yards.

With the UAE home to a large Indonesian expatriate community, Putro and co. had chosen the perfect moment to announce their arrival on the continent.

"Most of the Indonesian fans in the stadium lived in the UAE, so when I scored my goal it was really nice to be able to run over to them," said Putro.

Two nil up going into half-time, Indonesia could not have wished for a better start to their maiden campaign on the continent, but they were unable to hold on for the dream win.

With 17 minutes left on the clock, Hani Al Saqer pulled one back for the 1980 champions, before Bader Al Halabeej scored from the spot to secure a 2-2 draw with six minutes remaining.

The result, though, meant Indonesia went into their second fixture level pegging with the other teams in their group after the UAE and Korea Republic also tied their opening game.

Next up for Indonesia were the Koreans, who stormed into a three-goal lead inside 15 minutes, before adding a fourth 10 minutes after the interval.

But the Southeast Asians showed character as first Wabia and then Putro got their second goals of the campaign and Indonesia ensured the game ended 4-2.

A 2-0 defeat to the hosts would then bring the tournament to an end for Indonesia, but a point from three games against some of the more established teams on the continent was a reasonable return from their debut.

"I am still very proud because that was

a historical goal, not only for me, but also for Indonesian football," Putro admitted.

"All my teammates told me it was an amazing goal and the best I'd ever scored, and the Indonesian football fans were happy and proud of this team."

Indonesia would qualify for the next three editions of the competition, again gaining a point against Kuwait in 2000 in Lebanon, before exiting after defeats to China and Korea Republic.

Four years later, a first win was achieved when The Garuda overcame Qatar 2-1 in China to eventually finish third in their group following reversals to the hosts and Bahrain.

The closest the side have come to advancing from the group stage came in 2007 when, as co-hosts, an opening-day win over Bahrain was followed by narrow defeats to Saudi Arabia and Korea Republic as the Indonesians missed out on progressing by a solitary point.

Just over 11 and a half years since Putro's acrobatic effort in Abu Dhabi, the 1-0 defeat to Korea Republic in front of almost 90,000 spectators at Jakarta's Gelora Bung Karno Stadium marked the end of Indonesia's run of four successive AFC Asian Cup appearances.

The 2023 edition is the next chance the Southeast Asians have to qualify, and, with the level of competition continuing to rise across the continent, Putro is well aware of the significance of the achievements of his team's generation.

"Qualifying for the 1996 tournament was very important for the development of Indonesian football," insisted the 47-year-old.

"Because nowadays you can see just how difficult it is for us to qualify for the AFC Asian Cup."

While the biggest international competition in the AFC footballing calendar still has some time to wait before it is graced with Indonesia's presence once more, Putro will make his own return on the club scene in the coming weeks.

Whether his charges at Bali are able to produce the spectacular in the way he did all those years ago is yet to be seen.





DREAMING BIG

AFTER LEAVING AFGHANISTAN FOR THE NETHERLANDS AS A YOUNG CHILD, FAYDAL SHAYESTEH CAME THROUGH THE RANKS WITH FC TWENTE AND REPRESENTED THE DUTCH AT YOUTH LEVEL. NOW CAPTAIN OF HIS COUNTRY OF BIRTH, THE MIDFIELDER HAS HIGH HOPES THAT FOOTBALL WILL CONTINUE TO GROW IN THE SOUTH ASIAN NATION.





Afghanistan captain Faysal Shayesteh was only one when his parents were forced to flee in 1992 after the Taliban took control of the country. He doesn't remember any of the journey he, along with his two older brothers and older sister undertook, heading first to neighbouring Tajikistan, before continuing their journey to the Netherlands.

He does, however, know the massive sacrifice his parents made in order for their children to lead a normal life away from the troubles in Afghanistan.

"I was one-year-old in 1992 when the Taliban came in Afghanistan and they took over the government," he said.

"So from that moment it was very dangerous for me and my family to stay in Kabul. It was better for us to leave and so we left to the neighbour country Tajikistan, to Dushanbe. From there on we started our journey to Europe."

While they were out of immediate danger, their journey to freedom had only just begun, and there was another concern for the family to deal with.

"My brother was a little sick, he had some heart problems," Shayesteh explained.

"So my father said it's best if we go to a country like Holland or Germany because they were very highly educated and so that's why we moved to Holland."

"When we came to Holland we were first in a refugee centre, for about two years. It was a hard time for my parents because at that moment you don't know what's going to happen, if you can stay or not, because there's a big chance they will send you back to your country."

"You have to prove to them you are really in danger if you go back to Afghanistan. So for my parents it was difficult, but for me and for my brothers, we didn't know any different. We were young, we were thinking this is a part of life, and we tried to enjoy it and tried to do what normal kids do when they're young."

As a refugee from Afghanistan, becoming a professional footballer was the furthest thing from Shayesteh's mind. He and his older brother, Qays, played football for one simple reason – to have fun.

"When I came to Holland, we started playing on the street," he recalled.

"At that time people in the neighbourhood were always talking about FC Twente, that there was a soccer team that will bring you to school with the bus and if you play there you have a chance to be a professional soccer player."

"The other kids were always thinking about FC Twente, but me and my brother were just playing and having fun on the street. We never expected that one day we would be the two players who would go to FC Twente."

Qays, who is three years Faysal's senior, was the first member of the family to be spotted by the scouts of FC Twente's youth system, and it was through this connection that Faysal was introduced to the club.

"My brother Qays was very important for me," 26-year-old Shayesteh explained.

"He was a bigger talent than me and he was the first one who got into the professional academies at FC Twente."

"I was playing with the local amateur team, and normally in Holland when you have brothers, they always think maybe the talent is in the family. So after my brother got selected for the youth teams they asked him if he had brothers. My brother talked about me so they came to watch some of my games with my local team."

"When I did well I got invited to come and join the academy and I played there eight years."

It wasn't long before Shayesteh was called up to represent the Netherlands at youth level.

"That was also a very nice experience because I played with the best players in

Holland in my age, and now sometimes I see these players who play in the Premier League and the Dutch league, players like Luciano Narsingh, Jordy Clasie, Jeffrey Bruma."

Shayesteh revealed that as he grew older, and opportunities with Holland started to dry up, his attention started turning to his homeland.

"It was an easy decision because when I chose to play for Afghanistan I didn't have the potential like I had before (to play for Holland), you have to be realistic sometimes," he admitted.

"When I came home I was talking to my parents in the Afghan language. I follow the Afghan culture, so I also felt Afghan."

And he recalls vividly one moment in particular that cemented in his mind his desire to play for the nation of his birth.

"I remember when Afghanistan won the SAFF (South Asian Football Federation) Championship in 2013," he explained.

"We saw all these games and what happened in the country. Before that I didn't take the national team that seriously, but after they won the SAFF games in 2013 and (seeing) the impact and what it did for the country, I was thinking that's what I also want."

Before too long his dream became a reality when he made his debut against the Kyrgyz Republic in a friendly in the UAE.

Far Left & Above 2019 AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers

Left 2014 AFC Challenge Cup

"This was the first game after the 2013 SAFF games that Afghanistan won," he said.

"The game was in Dubai so I remember thinking that not many people will come. But when we entered the stadium and I saw the Afghan fans and I saw how many fans were living in Dubai I was very impressed, because the stadium was full, like 15 or 16,000 fans. All Afghans and they were cheering and that was my first game, it was crazy."

Just over a year after making his debut, Shayesteh was handed the honour of being named captain of his country, although he admits the responsibility comes with its share of challenges.

"In Afghanistan if you're captain you're the face of the nation," he explained.

"So imagine you're the face of a nation of millions of Afghans, not only in Afghanistan but all around the world. Afghan people are living all around the world because of the war."

"It's the biggest honour, but it also has a negative side. Sometimes you cannot be yourself. It also changed my life, my private life."

Shayesteh returned home recently to a rock star's reception, and was on hand to watch the opening stages of the Afghan

Premier League in Kabul. He admits he was pleasantly surprised by the development of the game in the country and could see why the Afghanistan Football Federation was recently awarded the AFC Aspiring Member Association of the Year at the AFC Annual Awards in Bangkok.

"For me it's always nice (to return home), and it was also nice to see the Premier League," he said.

"It's very professional, I was very surprised to be honest because I didn't expect that it would be so professional. I hope they can make it longer, I know it's hard because most of the places in Afghanistan still aren't safe, so it's hard for them to have a league like other countries."

"But I hope one day that it will happen because it will help football in Afghanistan grow."

And while it was nice to watch the game from the sideline, Shayesteh admitted he dreams of one day returning to play for the national team in Kabul, and maybe ending his career in the country.

"I think that's not only my dream, but for all the players it's a dream to play a match back in Afghanistan in a full stadium," he added. "If it's possible later and it's not dangerous anymore, I would like to play one season or end my career in Afghanistan."

Australia Advance To Fifth FIFA World Cup

A second-half hat-trick from captain Mile Jedinak secured Australia's place at the FIFA World Cup Russia 2018 after a 3-1 win over Honduras in the second leg of the Intercontinental Play-Off in mid-November ensured the Socceroos progressed by the same aggregate scoreline.

The sides had earlier played out a scoreless draw in San Pedro Sula to mean Ange Postecoglou's team returned home with a positive result but without a potentially crucial away goal.

After a goalless first half at Stadium Australia, Jedinak's deflected free-kick gave the hosts the lead, before the skipper notched two penalties in the final 20 minutes to give the home side a commanding lead.

The experienced Maynor Figueroa grabbed a consolation late on, by which time the 77,000 spectators were already in celebratory mode as Australia qualified for a fourth consecutive FIFA World Cup and fifth overall.

"[Jedinak] has been an outstanding captain, an outstanding leader on and off the park and it was great to see him out there tonight," said Postecoglou, who has since stood down as Australia's head coach.

"He's obviously missed a bit of the end of our campaign, but it was right that he was out there today because in the early part of the qualifying, which was a real grind for us, it was the likes of him, Timmy Cahill and Mark Milligan that steered us through it.

"Everyone's worked awfully hard over the last two and a half years. It's been a long 22 games and you just want to get rewarded for

it. "Just seeing them in the dressing room now, it's overwhelming."

Australia had earlier endured a topsy-turvy campaign in the third round of qualifying, with four successive draws on the back of winning their opening two matches seeing them fall behind the Group B pacesetters.

The Socceroos did recover, but only enough to finish third in the standings and book a Continental Play-Off date with the third-ranked team in Group A, Syria.

Experience ultimately told as Cahill's second-

Intercontinental Play-Off

10/11/2017

Honduras 0 Australia 0

15/11/2017

Australia 3 (Mile Jedinak 54, 72 pen, 85 pen) Honduras 1 (Maynor Figueroa 90+3)

leg brace – the second of which came in extra time – ensured a 3-2 aggregate win and lined up a clash with Honduras, who had finished fourth in the CONCACAF qualifiers.

The Central Americans were looking to progress to their third successive World Cup, and a hostile welcome awaited Australia at Estadio Olimpico Metropolitano in San Pedro Sula.

But the Socceroos, without the injured Cahill, had the better of the game with striker Tomi Juric missing the best of the first-half chances, before seeing his header saved early in the second half.

Goalkeeper Mat Ryan then saved from Carlos Costly with 10 minutes to play as

Australia held firm to return home with a draw.

Australia controlled the first half in Sydney but struggled to break down a Honduras side who were happy to sit deep and soak up the pressure.

In the end it took a slice of fortune for the hosts to open the scoring as Jedinak's free-kick deflected off Henry Figueroa in the wall to leave goalkeeper Donis Escobar stranded.

With 18 minutes to play, Bryan Acosta was adjudged to have handled in the box, allowing Jedinak to open up a two-goal lead before the result was put beyond doubt as the midfielder completed his treble from the spot after Robbie Kruse had been upended.

Maynor Figueroa did nudge home a consolation deep into stoppage time, but the 3-1 victory saw Australia qualify for their fifth World Cup to join the Islamic Republic of Iran, Japan, Korea Republic and Saudi Arabia at the global showpiece.

"It's been a hell of a journey, I've made a lot of friends along the way and it's been a hell of a ride with a brilliant family," said defender Trent Sainsbury.

"We hold the record now for the most games to qualify for the World Cup, so that's a bit special in itself.

"We've had a lot of ups and downs but at the same time this team have never stopped believing. But there's a lot of relief.

"At Russia 2018, everyone is going to be behind us and we're going to go out there with no fear of any team that we come across because that's how we've gone against every single team we've come up against."





Urawa Crowned Continental Champions



Japan's Urawa Red Diamonds claimed their second AFC Champions League title after seeing off Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal 2-1 on aggregate in November's final to add to their maiden success back in 2007.

After a 1-1 draw in the first leg in Riyadh, a packed Saitama Stadium then witnessed a nervy affair a week later with chances few and far between.

Al Hilal's Salem Al Dawsari blazed narrowly over in the first half, before being dismissed with just over 10 minutes to go for a second bookable offence.

With the scores tied at 0-0, Urawa would have won on the away goals rule, but Brazilian Rafael Silva erased any doubt by emphatically powering home with two minutes to play to send the crowd into raptures and condemn Al Hilal to a second AFC Champions League final defeat in four years.

"The players had a special motivation for this tournament, as did the supporters, so I

think this is why we were able to do so well," said Takafumi Hori, who replaced former head coach Mihailo Petrovic prior to the quarter-finals.

"I would like to thank the supporters, who gave their best, but also Petrovic who built the foundations of the team, and I learned from him.

"The first leg was away so I wanted to focus on defence, but at home we were able to attack more and be more aggressive. We were very prepared for our opponents today after studying them a lot."

Urawa had earlier booked their return to the final after a 10-year hiatus on the back of two stirring comebacks at Saitama Stadium against Korea Republic's Jeju United and domestic rivals Kawasaki Frontale in the Round of 16 and quarter-finals.

The semi-finals pitted them against China's free-scoring Shanghai SIPG but, following a 1-1 draw in Shanghai, Silva's first-half header proved enough for Urawa to become the first Japanese side to appear in the final since Gamba Osaka in 2008.

Ramon Diaz's Al Hilal, meanwhile, had seen off both Esteghlal Khuzestan of the Islamic Republic of Iran and 2016 runners-up Al Ain in the last 16 and quarter-finals, before being paired with Iran's Persepolis in the last four.

Omar Khribin netted a superb hat-trick in the first leg in a 4-0 victory, before the Syrian bagged a brace in the return fixture as a 2-2 draw ensured Al Hilal advanced to the final with their unbeaten record still intact.

Having not tasted defeat in the 2017 edition and with Khribin in fine form, Al Hilal went into the first leg of the final at King Fahd International Stadium full of confidence and looking to become the first team from West Asia to win the title since Al Sadd in 2011.

But it was Urawa who took the lead through Silva's early strike, before having to weather an Al Hilal storm as the Saudi side

came back strongly.

The tournament's top scorer Khribin did level the scores before the interval but goalkeeper Shusaku Nishikawa put in an outstanding display to deny the Syrian forward on several occasions and ensure Hori's side returned east with a draw.

Urawa had drawn 1-1 with Iran's Sepahan in the first leg of their only previous AFC Champions League final and, once more, they began the second leg at Saitama Stadium knowing a win would see them crowned continental champions.

As the game entered the second half goalless, Al Hilal needed a goal to have any chance of winning a first AFC Champions League title, while Urawa were aware that should they concede, the visitors would be in the driving seat.

Al Dawsari's sending off came as the Saudi team were pushing for the all-important goal and, down to 10 men, the game opened up further.

Yuki Muto's through ball found Silva as the clock ticked down and the Brazilian made no mistake to fire home his ninth of the tournament to wrap up the 2-1 aggregate win and maintain Urawa's perfect home record of seven wins from seven.

The defeat meant more heartbreak for Al Hilal, who had lost the 2014 final to Western Sydney Wanderers and remain in search of their first AFC Champions League crown.

"Maybe we lost our chance here in Tokyo after missing so many chances in Riyadh," said Argentine Diaz. "It was a dream to be here and we did well all the way through the tournament.

"I want to congratulate Urawa for winning the cup, but I'm really satisfied with my players. They performed very well, and I'm really proud of everyone at the club.

"We are a big team, so we need to get back on our feet as quickly as possible. We didn't have luck in this game, but it will give our players more valuable experience."

FINAL

Al Hilal 1 Urawa Red Diamonds 1

18/11/2017

Al Hilal 1 (Omar Khribin 37)
Urawa Red Diamonds 1 (Rafael Silva 7)

King Fahd International Stadium, Riyadh
Attendance: 59,136



Urawa Red Diamonds 1 Al Hilal 0

25/11/2017

Urawa Red Diamonds 1 (Rafael Silva 88)

Saitama Stadium, Saitama
Attendance: 57,727



Urawa Red Diamonds

win 2-1 on aggregate



Air Force Club Retain AFC Cup Title



mad Mohsin scored the only goal of the game as Iraq's Air Force Club defeated Tajikistan's FC Istiklol 1-0 in the AFC Cup final in early November to claim their second successive continental championship.

A goalless first half at Hisor Central Stadium saw Air Force Club's Zaher Al Medani head against the woodwork early on, before last year's top scorer Hammadi Ahmed's penalty eight minutes after the restart was saved by Nikola Stosic.

The defending champions eventually took the lead midway through the second half, though, when Ahmed laid back Sameh Saeed's cross from the right for Mohsin to power home from 12 yards.

The hosts pushed for the equaliser but clear-cut chances were few and far between as the tournament's best defence held firm for their seventh clean sheet in 11 games on the continent to add to the title they won against India's JSW Bengaluru a year

earlier.

"We were not so good in the first half, but after the break we regrouped and put in a much better performance," said Mohsin, who scored three times in the tournament.

"We put in a lot of effort throughout the season – the players, the coaching staff and even the fans who travelled to support us. This title is for everyone's efforts."

"It is an historic achievement for us and for Iraqi football. I am delighted that we were able to bring joy to our fans back in Iraq."

The high-scoring Air Force Club of 2016 had not been seen in the 2017 edition of the AFC Cup as they netted just 10 times in 10 games on route to their second successive final.

But the Iraqi side had shown a steeliness to overcome domestic rivals Al Zawraa and Syria's Al Wahda – the latter courtesy of late strikes in both legs – in the knockout rounds.

Istiklol, meanwhile, had remained unbeaten on their march to the final as they aimed to make up for the disappointment of finishing runners-up to Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim in the 2015 competition.

Five wins from six in the group stage was followed with victories over Ceres Negros of the Philippines and 2016 runners-up Bengaluru in the knockout rounds as the side booked their place in a second final in three years.

Having won all five of their home games on the continent, Istiklol went into the showpiece event looking to maintain their perfect record.

Air Force Club, though, had won the competition in their debut campaign a year earlier and were aiming to become two-time

continental champions.

Some 20,000 spectators crammed into Hisor Central Stadium but were almost silenced early on as Syrian Al Medani headed against the post from Humam Tareq's corner.

The hosts' top scorer Manuchehr Dzhalilov had one shot blocked and fired a second over the crossbar as the sides went into the interval level pegging.

Hussam Al Saed's team started the second half the brighter and were awarded a penalty when Fatkhullo Fatkhuloev upended Tareq in the box, only for Stosic to expertly deny Ahmed by diving full stretch to his right to push to safety.

Air Force Club were not to be denied, though, and broke the deadlock on 68 minutes through Mohsin's emphatic finish.

Istiklol pushed to level the tie but it was the holders who looked the more likely to add to their tally as Ahmed missed a couple of late chances to double their advantage.

But there were to be no further goals as Air Force Club were crowned back-to-back AFC Cup winners following a hard-fought 1-0 victory.

"It's a pity we lost the final at home, our second final in the last three seasons, because we wanted to bring happiness to our fans," said Istiklol head coach Mukhsin Mukhamadiev.

"We lost our concentration in the second half and Air Force Club took advantage of this to score the winning goal of the tournament."

"My team played well but we couldn't take the last step of our mission. I think we have improved more and more in this tournament, but I congratulate Air Force Club for winning."





Japan win AFC U-19 Women's Championship



iko Ueki scored the only goal of the game as Japan defeated DPR Korea 1-0 in the final of the AFC U-19 Women's Championship in Nanjing at the end of October to retain the title they won two years ago.

The teams went into the clash at Jiangning Sports Center with a perfect four wins from four and, just like the final two years ago, there was little to separate the sides in a goalless first half.

But five minutes after the interval, Ueki scored the decisive goal as she cut in from the left and fired past goalkeeper Ri Jong-sim from outside the box as the Young Nadeshiko followed up their penalty shootout victory over the same opponents two years ago with a 1-0 win.

The two teams, along with third-placed China, also secured their qualification for the 2018 FIFA U-20 Women's World cup in France in August.

"I congratulate my players, they played very hard," said head coach Futoshi Ikeda. "At half time I told them I wanted them to continue what they were doing and be confident going into the second half.

"DPR Korea are strong and they have many great players, but my players didn't mind that they were playing against them – the only thing that mattered was to win the game and to win the tournament.

"We became champions of Asia, so the players now have an experience of great success. We will be prepared for the World Cup."

Japan began their continental campaign with an 8-0 victory over Vietnam as a second-half hat-trick from Saori Takarada helped move the East Asians to the top of the Group B standings.

Australia joined Japan on three points following a 2-0 win against Korea Republic, but then the Young Nadeshiko opened up a three-point gap as Takarada scored two more in a 5-1 victory over the Young Matildas on Matchday Two.

Korea Republic gained their first win by seeing off Vietnam 5-0 to keep them in the hunt for semi-final qualification.

But Japan would prove too strong as second-half goals from Mami Muraoka and Oto Kanno secured a 2-0 win over Korea Republic and top spot in the standings, while Australia wrapped up second place with a 5-2 victory over Vietnam.

In Group A, Sung Hyang-sim scored four as DPR Korea posted a resounding 9-0 win over Thailand in their opening fixture, while hosts China defeated Uzbekistan 2-0.

The two sides then set up a battle for top spot as DPR Korea beat Uzbekistan 2-0 and China defeated Thailand by the same scoreline to go into the final group game level on six points.

And it was to be Thomas Gerstner's DPR Korea who advanced as table-toppers as first-half goals from An Song-ok and Ri hae-yon claimed a 2-0 win.

Thailand and Uzbekistan, meanwhile, left the tournament with a point apiece following a 2-2 draw as they brought their respective campaigns to a close.

The semi-finals paired Japan with China and DPR Korea against Australia, and it was to be the 2015 finalists – Japan and DPR Korea – who proved too strong.

Goalless at half-time, Japan scored twice in quick succession early in the second half through a Hinata Miyazawa brace, before a Chen Qiaozhu own-goal made it three shortly after the hour.

Ueki added a fourth soon after and Rina Mehara put the gloss on a 5-0 victory as Japan progressed to yet another final.

Kim Pom-ui opened the scoring early on for DPR Korea in their semi-final with Australia, before Sung made it two as the half hour approached.

Sung's second midway through the second half put the result beyond doubt as the 3-0 win secured the East Asians' spot in the final.

There was still all to play for in the third-place play-off with the hosts and Australia battling it out for Asia's third and final spot at the 2018 FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup.

And it was China who would end the tournament on a high as goals from He Luyao, Xie Qiwen and Jin Kun claimed a 3-0 win and a place in France.

Japan's 1-0 win in the final secured a record fifth AFC U-19 Women's Championship, while DPR Korea have now finished as runners-up in the past four editions of the competition.

Sung, though, was named the Most Valuable Player, while the forward's six goals saw her also pick up the Top Scorer award.



Group A							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/- Pts
DPR Korea	3	3	0	0	13	0	13 9
China	3	2	0	1	4	2	2 6
Uzbekistan	3	0	1	2	2	6	-4 1
Thailand	3	0	1	2	2	13	-11 1

15/10/2017
China 2 (Chen Yuanmeng 19, Liu Jing 61 pen) Uzbekistan 0
DPR Korea 9 (Sung Hyang-sim 12, 45+1, 47, 69, Kim Pom-ui 19 pen, Ri Hae-yon 39, 64, Ju Hyo-sim 45+2, An Song-ok) Thailand 0

18/10/2017
Thailand 0
China 2 (Tipkrittta Onsama 29 OG, Liu Jing 72) Uzbekistan 0
DPR Korea 2 (Ju Hyo-sim 9, Kim Pom-ui 58)

21/10/2017
China 0 DPR Korea 2 (An Song-ok 3, Ri Hae-yon 28)
Thailand 2 (Kanyanat Chetthabutr 45+1, Orrapan Bunghong 71)
Uzbekistan 2 (Diyorakhon Khabibullaeva 9, 66)

Group B							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/- Pts
Japan	3	3	0	0	15	1	14 9
Australia	3	2	0	1	8	7	1 6
Korea Republic	3	1	0	2	5	4	1 3
Vietnam	3	0	0	3	2	18	-16 0

16/10/2017
Korea Republic 0 Australia 2 (Remy Siemsen 70, Princess Ibini-Isei 90+3)
Japan 8 (Jun Endo 3, Nana Ora 30, Riko Ueki 33, Saori Takarada 53, 59, 67, Mizuka Sato 57, 73) Vietnam 0

19/10/2017
Vietnam 0 Korea Republic 5 (Mun Eun-ju 8, Kim So-eun 23, 74, 85, Kim Eun-soul 58) Australia 1 (Remy Siemsen 13)
Japan 5 (Asato Miyagawa 51, Honoka Hayashi 58, Hinata Miyazawa 66, Saori Takarada 72, 90+3)

22/10/2017
Japan 2 (Mami Muraoka 49, Oto Kanno 81)
Korea Republic 0
Australia 5 (Remy Siemsen 5, Rachel Lowe, 13, Alexandra Chidiac 28, 69, 72) Vietnam 2 (Tuyet Ngan 50, Ha Thi Nhai 81)

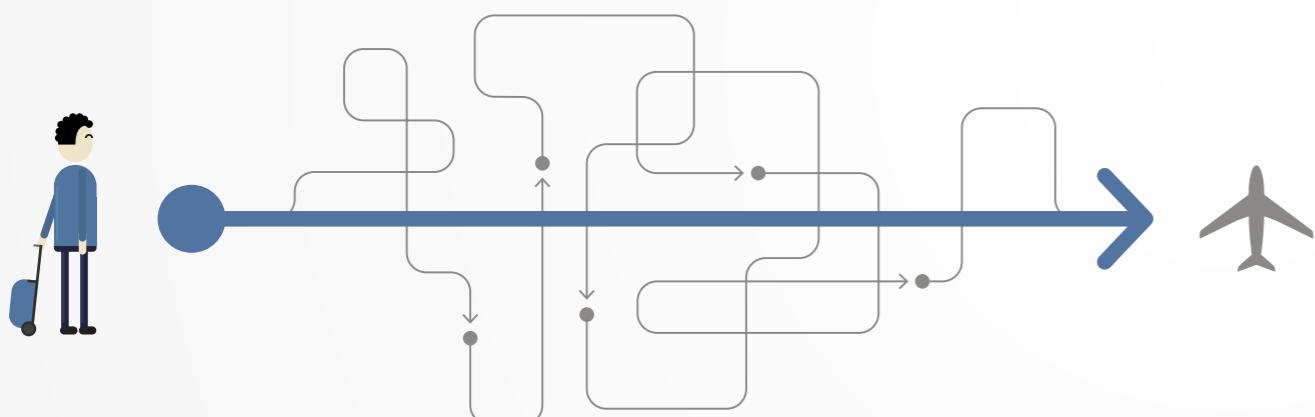
Semi-Finals
25/10/2017
DPR Korea 3 (Kim Pom-ui 9 pen, Sung Hyang-sim 28, 65) Australia 0
Japan 5 (Hinata Miyazawa 47, 48, Chen Qiaozhu 61 OG, Riko Ueki 64, Rina Mehara 85) China 0

Third Place Play-off
28/10/2017
Australia 0 China 3 (He Luyao 20, Xie Qiwen 53, Jin Kun 54)

Final
28/10/2017
DPR Korea 0 Japan 1 (Riko Ueki 50)



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Quintet Seal Places At AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019



Group A								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ - Pts	
India	5	4	1	0	10	3	7	13
Kyrgyz Republic	4	2	1	1	7	6	1	8
Myanmar	4	1	2	1	8	5	3	5
Macau	5	0	0	5	4	15	-11	0

14/11/2017
India 2 Myanmar 2
Macau 3 Kyrgyz Republic 4

Group B								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ - Pts	
Lebanon	5	4	1	0	12	3	9	13
DPR Korea	5	2	2	1	11	10	1	8
Hong Kong	5	1	2	2	4	5	-1	5
Malaysia	5	0	1	4	4	13	-9	1

10/11/2017
DPR Korea 4 Malaysia 1
13/11/2017
Malaysia 1 DPR Korea 4
14/11/2017
Hong Kong 0 Lebanon 1

Group C								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ - Pts	
Jordan	5	3	2	0	15	4	11	11
Vietnam	5	2	3	0	8	2	6	9
Cambodia	5	1	0	4	2	15	-13	3
Afghanistan	5	0	3	2	5	9	-4	3

competition following a 1-0 win over Cambodia in Group C in Phnom Penh which, in turn, eliminated the Cambodians.

The result secured second place for Vietnam, who played out a scoreless draw with Afghanistan in Hanoi, and would advance as table-toppers should they claim victory in their final Matchday against the Jordanians.

Palestine and Oman had already confirmed the top two spots in Group D but continued their impressive form by defeating Bhutan and the Maldives – 4-2 and 8-1 respectively – on their Matchday Five encounters.

Oman host Palestine at the end of March needing a victory to have any chance of progressing as group winners, while Bhutan will look to pick up their first points in the group when travel to the Maldives.

The qualification spots in Group E have also been wrapped up after Bahrain won in Singapore and Turkmenistan defeated Chinese Taipei in Balkanabat.

Altymyrat Annadurdyew scored the decisive goal as Turkmenistan advanced to only their second AFC Asian Cup following a 2-1 victory, while Mahdi Abduljabbar netted twice in Bahrain's 3-0 victory over Singapore to secure a fifth consecutive qualification berth.

Finally, there remains all to play for in Group F, where top side the Philippines could have secured their place but drew 0-0 in Nepal, while Tajikistan and Yemen also ended goalless.

The Philippines will progress to the UAE should they avoid defeat at home to the Tajiks in March, while Yemen will advance to a maiden AFC Asian Cup if they beat Nepal in Doha.

Group D								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ - Pts	
Palestine	5	5	0	0	25	2	23	15
Oman	5	4	0	1	27	5	22	12
Maldives	5	1	0	4	4	19	-15	3
Bhutan	5	0	0	5	2	32	-30	0

14/11/2017
Bhutan 2 Oman 4
Palestine 8 Maldives 1

Group E								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ - Pts	
Bahrain	5	3	1	1	11	3	8	10
Turkmenistan	5	3	1	1	9	6	3	10
Chinese Taipei	5	2	0	3	6	12	-6	6
Singapore	5	0	2	3	3	8	-5	2

14/11/2017
Turkmenistan 2 Chinese Taipei 1
Singapore 0 Bahrain 3

Group F								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ - Pts	
Philippines	5	2	3	0	11	7	4	9
Yemen	5	1	4	0	5	4	1	7
Tajikistan	5	2	1	2	9	7	2	7
Nepal	5	0	2	3	2	9	-7	2

14/11/2017
Nepal 0 Philippines 0
Tajikistan 0 Yemen 0

AFC-AIPS Asia MoU To Enhance Media Coverage

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with AIPS Asia, the Asian body of the international sports media association, to enhance media coverage of football across the continent and offer exciting training and learning opportunities for budding football journalists.

AFC General Secretary Dato' Windsor John said at the launch of the cooperation agreement: "This is an important partnership agreement for us both. We are united in our commitment to enhance football in Asia.

"It is the AFC's vision to make football the number one sport in Asia and the media plays an important role in that objective. We thank AIPS Asia for their support and for spreading the message of the power of football.

"The AFC provides tailor-made football development



assistance to its Member Associations. Media and communications training forms an ever-increasing part of this.

"We will look to involve AIPS Asia where possible in that area while also exploring other ways of cooperation."

Speaking at the signing ceremony, AIPS Asia Vice President Ahmad Khawari Isa said: "Football and media are two important components that need each other.

"AIPS Asia aims to forge close relationships with all sport bodies and we know that the AFC acknowledges the unique requirements of the sports media in Asia, our members."

The AFC will look to involve AIPS Asia in its media and communications workshops

and both organisations will aim to launch new annual journalism awards, the Best Male and Female Football Journalist of the Year in Asia Award.

AFC Supports International Football's Return To Iraq

Asian Football Confederation President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa met with Iraq's Minister of Youth and Sports Abed Al-Hussein Abed Al Rida Abttan and Iraqi Football Association (IFA) President Abed-Alkhalil Masoud Ahmed in November to discuss the prospect of staging international football in Iraq.

Following the recent successful organisation of international friendly matches in Basra and Karbala, the talks between Sheikh Salman and the visiting Iraqi dignitaries focused mainly on the lifting of the current ban on Iraq hosting international matches on its territory.

"We would definitely like to see international competitions, including AFC events, coming back to Iraq. The AFC will always be there to support the Iraqi football family," Shaikh Salman reassured the delegation.



"Iraq has been consistently outstanding at all levels of the game and since the security situation has improved a lot, we are optimistic that international football will stage a big comeback in Iraq very soon.

"The AFC will be sending a fact-finding mission shortly to visit several other venues in Iraq, and based on this security report, we will make a decision and coordinate with FIFA to consider Iraq's request to host international matches and competitions in other cities," he added.

In May 2017, the FIFA Council lifted the ban on Iraq to host international friendlies in three venues: Arbil, Basra and Karbala.

Iraq played their first international match against Jordan in June 2017 at Basra after the lifting of the ban. Also, a friendly match with FIFA legends was organised in September 2017 in Basra.

FIFA President Hails AFC's Global Contribution

FIFA President Gianni Infantino praised the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) on the progress of Asian football and the continent's contribution to the world game at an AFC Executive Committee meeting in Bangkok in late November.

The FIFA President said: "I feel it is a great privilege and great honour to be with you in this Executive Committee. I am a friend of Asia, I feel part of the Asian family and we can see the progress in football in Asia. This is because of the work of your President and all of you in the AFC.

"We can see the results of the co-operation between FIFA and the AFC already as we show the positive spirit of working for football. Like on a football pitch, we have to work together to develop football in Asia and by doing



this we can achieve even greater results.

"The AFC should be proud of what you achieve. We have organised all the FIFA events in Asia and everything has been a success. Asia is an important stakeholder for FIFA," added the FIFA President.

The AFC President Shaikh Salman said: "It is a privilege to have the FIFA President at the AFC Executive Committee as he is a friend of Asia and I offer him my unconditional support. We have shown our unity since the FIFA Presidential election last year by working extremely

closely.

"I think that I can say that the FIFA President has the backing of the football family in Asia as it is felt that he is fair to us and all the Confederations."

AFC Asian Cup To Make Football Asia's Leading Sport

The Asian Football Confederation's Organising Committee for the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 has launched its vision and mission for the continental competition.

The Committee, meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, agreed that the vision for the tournament, which will be extended to 24 teams for the first time, should be to make football the number one sport throughout Asia.

At a meeting where the latest preparation work was detailed, it was also confirmed that the tournament would showcase football in Asia in the biggest ever finals and that the event would enhance the awareness of and attendance at the AFC Asian Cup in the United Arab Emirates.



The Asian Cup UAE 2019 also presents an opportunity to unite all local and international football fans in the Middle East and demonstrate the cultural diversity of the event, as well as strengthening football as the main sport in the UAE.

There was also a presentation from H E Aref Hamad Al Awani, Chairperson of the Local Organising Committee and General Secretary of the Abu Dhabi Sports Council, who confirmed that Rashed Stadium, home of Al Ahli which hosted the first leg of the AFC Champions League final in 2015, will be the second stadium used for the

matches scheduled in Dubai.

The draw for the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 will take place on April 27, 2018 – one month after the final round of qualifying matches.

AFC Youth Conference Held In Kuala Lumpur

The Asian Football Confederation's Second Youth Conference, aimed at identifying trends in boys' international youth football, took place over three days in Kuala Lumpur in mid-November.

The conference was attended by 100 delegates from 43 of the AFC's Member Associations and also hosted guests from FIFA, UEFA, CONCACAF and CAF.

Opening the conference, AFC President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa said: "Youth football is the foundation on which the future of the game is built. Success at the senior level can only be achieved through a commitment towards creating sustainable and detailed pathways for tomorrow's generation to flourish.

"As part of the AFC's Vision and Mission, technical development is an essential focus area for the AFC to raise the quality of football for all our Member



Associations. Across the globe, youth development is evolving quickly.

"Therefore, it is essential for Asia to examine our approach to ensure our players are progressing in the best possible environment."

The AFC President added: "This conference has also been organised at a crucial time for Asian football. Worldwide attention has focused on our continent with the FIFA U-20 and U-17 World Cup hosted in Korea Republic and India respectively

this year.

"The delegates will benefit from an in-depth analysis of these two tournaments and gain insights on the best youth development practices in Europe and Asia. The AFC Elite Youth Scheme, which will enhance the quality of youth academies across the continent, will also be discussed in great detail."

Mobile App Boosts AFC Fight Against Match-Fixing

The Asian Football Confederation has introduced a new AFC integrity mobile application, which will enable fans, players and officials to report possible suspicious activities or provide information concerning match-fixing or corruption to the AFC Integrity Unit.



"Digital media and technologies have redefined how people communicate. This new mobile app will enhance our detection abilities and our intelligence network which will further strengthen our pursuit to combat match-fixing."

The new application, which is free and available for download in Apple's App Store and on Google Play, will also strengthen the AFC's 360-degree approach on match-manipulation through the implementation of measures aimed at preventing, detecting and responding to match-fixing.

The AFC has also taken several measures to enhance its capabilities to detect match fixing, including its long-standing partnership with market leaders, Sportradar.

The agreement, which has assisted to uncover several match-fixing cases in the last year, encompasses more than 4,500 matches across Asia each year through the specifically developed AFC Monitoring System (AMS).

AFC & CONCACAF To Have Referee Exchanges

The Asian Football Confederation's Referees Committee Chairman Chung Mong-gyu has approved an exchange of officials with CONCACAF in the AFC and CONCACAF Champions League quarter- and semi-finals to enhance the opportunities of international exposure for AFC referees.

The AFC Vision and Mission sets the objective of providing the best opportunities for Asian teams – including teams of officials – to succeed and flourish on the world stage, and this exchange programme is viewed as an important component in reaching that goal.

Mr Chung, in his opening address, underlined the point when he said: "Across the globe, Asian referees are increasingly being regarded as the benchmark for excellence. We must continue to invest in the development of our



referees to help them meet the demands of the modern game."

The AFC Referees Committee also approved the introduction of the certification of AFC Referee Instructors from 2019 onwards, which will ensure the quality, quantity and consistency of referee training in Asia.

After the introduction of the certification, only those holding the necessary qualifications will be appointed to the AFC refereeing development and competition activities, as AFC underlines its commitment to excellence.

It was recommended that Asia's top referees would now be evaluated in match situations rather than the current process for the recruitment of officials to the AFC Elite Referees Panel. It was also suggested that the age criteria for AFC assistant referees be brought into line with the current stipulations for referees.

AFC Competitions Committee Meets Over Travel Bans

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Competitions Committee has requested that Member Associations affected by travel bans approach their governments to request that football teams be exempt from such restrictions.

The AFC regulations state that visas should be issued and safety and security should be guaranteed by the host nation and the Competitions Committee recommended that the Governments should be reminded of this regulation.

It was also recommended that, if necessary, a high-level delegation from the AFC should seek a solution between the affected parties.

The AFC Asian Cup qualifying Group A match between Kyrgyz Republic and Myanmar, which was postponed from September 5, 2017 because of security concerns, will now be played on March 22, 2018 at a neutral

venue, with the Football Federation of the Kyrgyz Republic covering all the costs of the Myanmar team and of the match organisation, including airfares and accommodation.



The two Member Associations will be requested to agree on the neutral venue, and if they fail to reach a consensus the AFC will make the appointment.

On issues related to club competitions, the AFC Competition Committee has expressed a desire to maintain a home-and-away format for Asia's leading club

competitions, wherever the venue is.

There will also be a study on the costs and benefits of the proposal by the Saudi Arabian Football Federation that the AFC age-group competitions should no longer be separated into zones at the qualifying stage but instead be an open draw.

Melbourne Rectangular Stadium

Melbourne, Australia

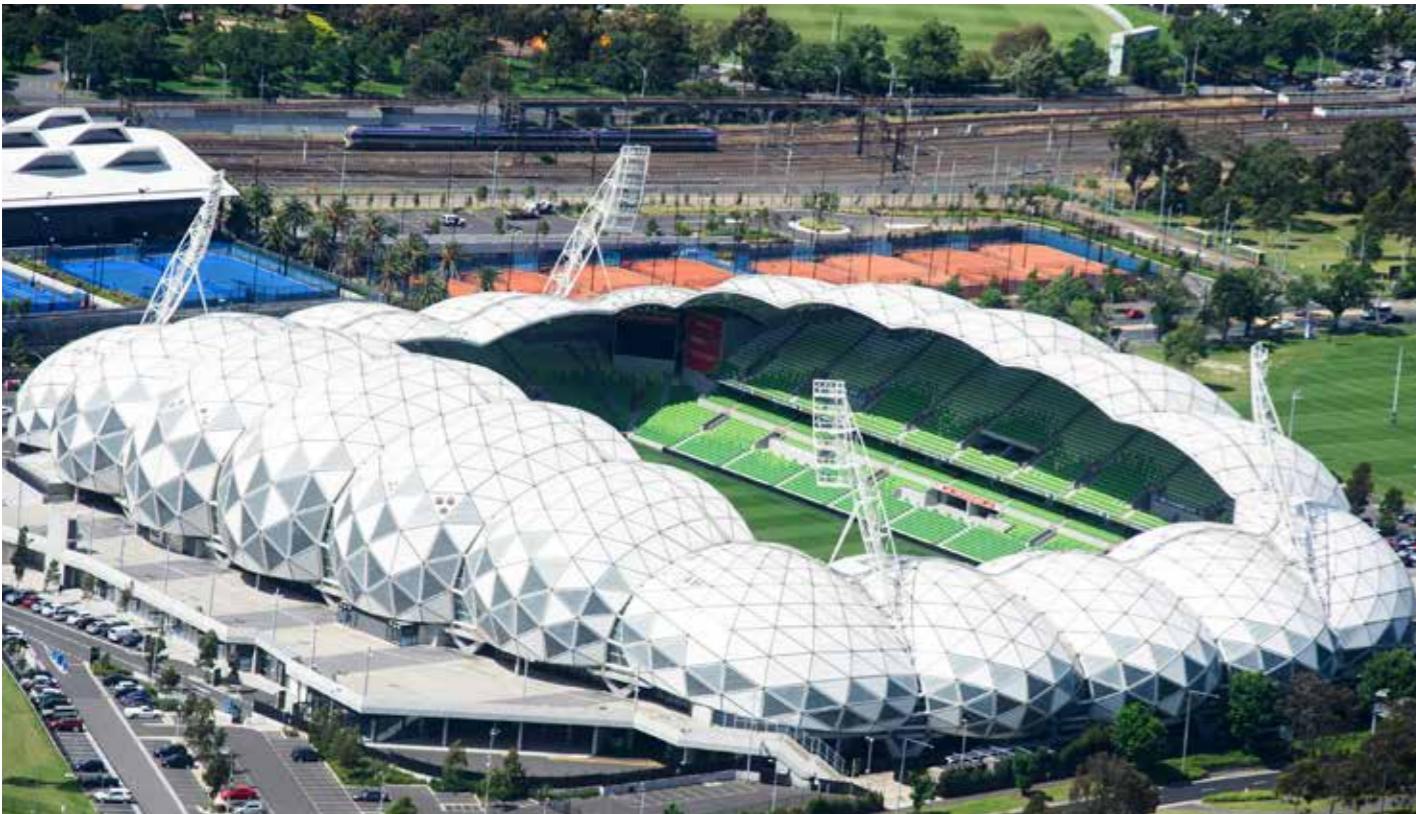
Purpose-built to provide the best possible spectator experience for football, rugby and rugby league, Melbourne Rectangular Stadium, with its striking bioframe roof, has garnered a number of national and international architectural, engineering and design awards. Since opening in May 2010,

Melbourne Rectangular Stadium has rapidly become a much-loved centrepiece for sport in Melbourne.

Besides the 2015 AFC Asian Cup opener between Australia and Kuwait in 2015, as well as six other matches including one quarter-final game, the 30,000-capacity stadium hosted Australia's final group stage match of the FIFA World Cup Qualifiers against Thailand last September.

The venue is also the home ground for Melbourne's two A-League clubs – Melbourne Victory and Melbourne City, while National Rugby League side Melbourne Storm and Super Rugby's Melbourne Rebels also play their games in the venue.

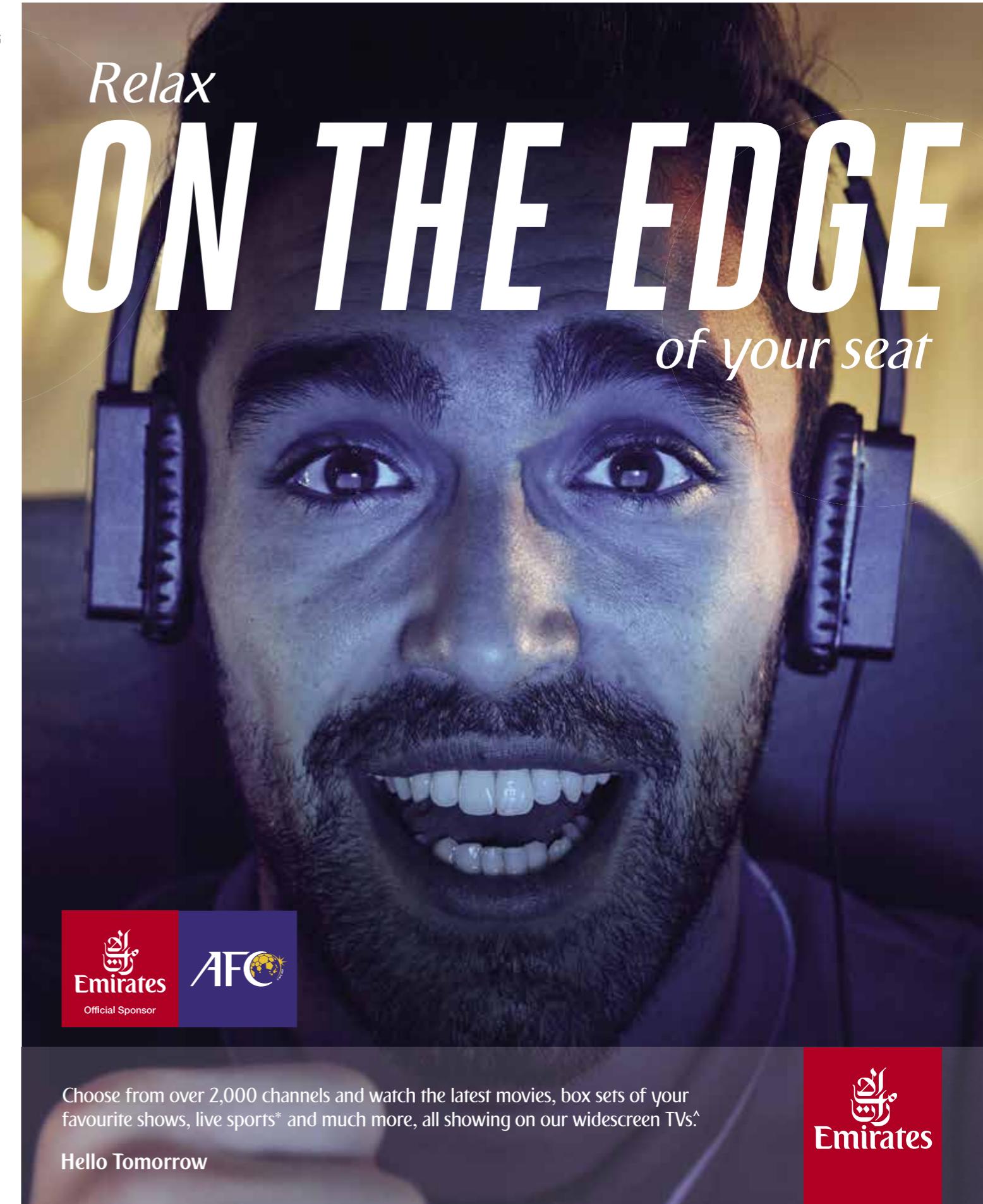
AFC Champions League action will once again return to the stadium after Victory's successful qualification for the 2018 edition.



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Omar Khribin

